



THE STATE
of ALASKA
GOVERNOR MICHAEL J. DUNLEAVY

Department of Health and Social Services

ALASKA COMMISSION ON AGING

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April 5, 2019

Senator David Wilson, Chair
Senate Health & Social Services Committee
Alaska State Capitol, Room 115
Juneau, Alaska 99811-0001

Subject: SB 58, Letter of Concern

Dear Chair Wilson and Senate Health and Social Services Committee Members:

The Alaska Commission on Aging (ACoA and "the Commission") is concerned about the proposed elimination of the Senior Benefits Payment as requested by SB 58. Since 2007, the *needs-based* Senior Benefits program has provided an invaluable resource for older Alaskans, age 65+, who live on limited fixed incomes to afford basic life necessities – food, housing, heating fuel, prescription medications, and transportation – to maintain good health, safety, and independence. Reauthorized overwhelmingly by the Legislature last year, Senior Benefits provides cash assistance to approximately 11,600 older Alaskans ranging from \$76 to \$250 a month based on three levels of income eligibility with their assigned cash benefits (Division of Public Assistance, December 2018 counts).

The Alaska Commission on Aging, a Governor-appointed board within the Department of Health and Social Services, exists specifically to ensure the dignity and independence of all older Alaskans. The Commission is responsible for planning services for seniors, educating Alaskans about senior issues, and making recommendations directly to elected officials regarding policy and budget items that affect Alaska's seniors.

We believe that Senior Benefits, a critical component of the Senior Safety Net, supports older Alaskans who are the most financially fragile by providing direct cash assistance to eligible seniors who cannot afford to pay for basic necessities, let alone cover emergency needs like a boiler repair during the dead of winter.

Over the years, growth in the number of seniors participating in the Senior Benefits program has been modest. Since 2007 when the program was established, the annual enrollment figures have increased about an average of 2.3% statewide even though the population of people age 65 and older has increased approximately 8.4% annually during the same time period.

The risk of living in poverty increases with age, along with worry about financial security, as older people spend down their assets on health care and living expenses. The Commission fully supports retaining the Senior Benefits Program in statute and does not support passage of SB 58. We believe that the Senior Benefits program is important for low-income elders because not having enough food to eat, a warm place to live, or losing one's home due to economic hardship means losing independence, self-determination,

and inevitably translates into a higher cost to the family and to the state in the need for expensive medical care and long-term care.

Thank you for your consideration of these comments. Please contact Denise Daniello, ACoA's Executive Director, at 465-4879 or denise.daniello@alaska.gov for further information about our position.

Sincerely,



Gordon Glaser
Chair, Alaska Commission on Aging

Sincerely,



Mary Shields
Vice Chair, Alaska Commission on Aging

Cc: Senator John Coghill, Vice Chair
Senator Gary Stevens, Member
Senator Cathy Giessel, Member
Senator Tom Begich, Member