

STATE OF ALASKA

DEPT. OF HEALTH & SOCIAL SERVICES

Alaska Commission on Aging

March 10, 2011

The Honorable Hollis French, Chair
Senate Judiciary Committee
Alaska State Capitol, Rooms 417
Juneau, AK 99801-1182

SEAN PARNELL, GOVERNOR

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Subject: Support for SB 86, Protection of Vulnerable Adults

Dear Chair French:

The Alaska Commission on Aging (ACoA) is pleased to offer our support of SB 86, a bill sponsored by the Senate Rules Committee at the request of Governor Parnell, to increase protection of vulnerable older adults against acts of abuse and financial exploitation. As the number of older Alaskans continues to increase, especially those of the "oldest old" (age 85 and older), so has the number of substantiated reports of harm to Adult Protective Services (APS), the Office of Long-Term Care Ombudsman (OLTCO) and the Office of Elder Fraud and Assistance (OEFA). Legislation is needed to increase safeguards for vulnerable adults who are at increased risk of abuse and financial exploitation. Older people with dementia and other cognitive impairments, those who are confined to their beds, and isolated seniors are particularly vulnerable to elder mistreatment.

Elder abuse is a devastating and unrecognized problem that oftentimes goes unreported and can have life-threatening consequences. According to a report from the National Institute of Justice (March 2009), approximately 11% of people age 60 years and older suffer some form of abuse every year. Other studies have shown that elderly victims of abuse, exploitation, and neglect have twice the risk of dying within a year. The National Center on Elder Abuse estimates that only one out of six elder abuse incidents (excluding the cases of self-neglect) are reported to authorities.

In Alaska, reports of harm against older adults are increasing. According to data from Adult Protective Services, there has been a 169% increase in the number of reports received over the last four years. In 2010, there were a total of 813 reports of harm received by APS of which 343 were substantiated. The most frequent reports related to self-neglect (49.9%), financial exploitation (18.7%), and neglect (9.3%). Since cases are underreported, particularly if the abuser is a family member, it is likely that the magnitude of the problem is far greater than what is reported. Similarly, the OLTCO reports more than a 200% increase in the number of complaints filed about treatment of seniors in long-term care facilities over the past three years.

Financial exploitation of older adults is a growing problem that may be linked to current economic times. It is sometimes referred to as a "silent crime" or a "crime of opportunity" because there are few external signs and victims are often reluctant to report the offense. In other situations, the victim may be in the early stages of dementia and not realize what has transpired. Front-line bank employees are often the first to recognize a suspected case of financial exploitation and can help a senior who is at risk of losing their money or assets. Although financial institutions are not included in the list of mandatory reporters in HB 150, ACoA recommends that the Department offer training to educate bank personnel on recognizing the warning signs of elder financial exploitation and how to report suspected cases to APS.

The cost of elder abuse is significant. When an elder is victimized and needs services from APS, the OLTCO, and law enforcement agencies or loses his/her life-long financial assets and becomes Medicaid-eligible, the State bears the costs to provide this assistance. More disturbing is the personal cost to elderly victims where abuse often compromises a person's independence and feeling of security and can lead to depression, hopelessness, or even suicide.

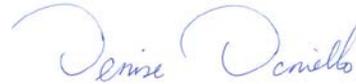
Thank you for your consideration and support of this legislation. Please feel free to contact Denise Daniello, ACoA's executive director, by phone (465-4879) or email (denise.daniello@alaska.gov) should you have questions or require additional information. Thank you.

Sincerely,



Sharon Howerton-Clark
Chair, Alaska Commission on Aging

Sincerely,



Denise Daniello
ACoA Executive Director

Cc: Senator Bill Wielechowski, Vice-Chair
Senator Joe Paskvan
Senator Lesil McGuire
Senator John Coghill
Governor Sean Parnell
Mike Lesmann, Governor's Special Assistant