



THE STATE  
of **ALASKA**  
GOVERNOR MICHAEL J. DUNLEAVY

## Department of Health and Social Services

GOVERNOR'S COUNCIL ON DISABILITIES  
& SPECIAL EDUCATION

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Commissioner Adam Crum  
3601 C Street, Suite 902  
Anchorage, Alaska 99503  
Via Email: [adam.crum@alaska.gov](mailto:adam.crum@alaska.gov)

RE: Executive Order 121

Dear Commissioner Crum,

The Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education (the Council) fills a variety of federal and state roles, including serving as the State Council on Developmental Disabilities (SCDD) under the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act. As the state DD Council, the Council works with Senior and Disabilities Services and other state agencies to ensure that people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) and their families receive the services and supports that they need, as well as participate in the planning and design of those services. Our council membership is composed of self-advocates and family members of individuals with intellectual and development disabilities (60%), as well as agency and partner representatives (40%). One of the duties of the state DD Council is providing comments on proposed recommendations that may have an impact on individuals with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities and their families.

The Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) is asked to perform an enormous amount of work and service for Alaska, while also navigating a landscape where healthcare delivery systems and economic support structures lack efficiency and face escalating threats to long term sustainability. There have been many approaches to streamline, improve, enhance, and reorganize state health and welfare services in Alaska over the years. We have struggled to implement good public policy relating to the physical, mental, emotional, and social well-being that lasts beyond the next election cycle and health and social programs suffer from a lack of systemic strategic planning.

Across ten (10) separate divisions, over three thousand two hundred (3,200) employees balance increases in work complexity and volume and try to responsibly manage the day-to-day operations of a very diverse department. They are asked to simultaneously remain informed and aware of developments happening at the local, state, and federal levels, to control costs, to maximize resource utilization, and to provide policy recommendations based on quality data analysis. DHSS staff work to ensure Alaskans' healthcare and social programs are easier to access, are based on best practices, and result in increased health and wellbeing across communities. The diversity and complexity of these programs require dedicated, informed, and

practical leadership during the best of times. And we have had several years of extraordinary challenge, which have pushed many critical programs and services close to the breaking point.

The current resources available to the Commissioner of DHSS must be given adequate support and capacity to engage meaningfully on issues of utmost importance. There have been requests in previous years to provide additional staff and resources within DHSS to help mitigate the demand. However, little to no progress was made in securing additional personnel, funding, and/or capacity despite good faith efforts to do so through multiple different approaches. GCDSE believes that the Commissioner, Governor, and Legislature all want to see improvements made in the Alaskan healthcare system but struggle with the current level of resources available to them to do so.

Reducing incidents of harm and neglect, decreasing the numbers of individuals unable to access or afford essential services, provide medical care to those with complex needs, recognize and heal generational traumas, and minimize workforce erosion are not simple problems to solve. And those are just a few of the big picture issues. Urgent crises arise with alarming regularity including abuse/neglect within institutional settings, natural disasters, and the ongoing COVID19 pandemic which all require immediate response and quickly consume the available capacity within DHSS leadership and leave little to none left over for pursuing systemic changes.

Thank you for meeting with the Governor's Council members and staff multiple times over the last year to discuss the reorganization of the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS), and to engage meaningfully on the questions, concerns, and recommendations brought forward by GCDSE. People with disabilities and their families face many obstacles in their daily lives, and these issues deserve to have adequate engagement and prioritization from department leadership so that we can work together to find and implement solutions to complex problems.

During this process, GCDSE raised questions relating to the very specific federal requirements which govern many of our functions, and which are unique to GCDSE. We believe that we will continue to need robust engagement with and support from the department going forward and understand the need to provide a more defined structure within the Executive Branch which will allow for more focused and deliberate efforts, and we believe lead to higher caliber supports and services for Alaskans with disabilities.

To conclude, GCDSE strongly supports the reorganization and separation of DHSS into two new smaller departments better aligned with the size and scope of other state departments and agencies. We urge the legislature to engage in robust discussions with the Administration regarding your vision for the future and to learn more about how this proposed bifurcation will help move you closer to your goals. The Council looks forward to continuing to work with you during and after this transition period and are excited to begin substantively engaging on the issues most important to the disability community. Please feel free to contact me with questions.

Sincerely,



Myranda Walso  
Acting Executive Director, GCDSE



Heidi Lieb-Williams  
Council Chair, GCDSE