



THE STATE  
of **ALASKA**  
GOVERNOR MIKE DUNLEAVY

Department of  
Health and Social Services

ALASKA COMMISSION ON AGING

P.O. Box 110693  
Juneau, Alaska 99811-0693  
Main: 907.465.3250  
Fax: 907.465.1398

February 27, 2019

The Honorable Mike Dunleavy  
Governor, State of Alaska  
P.O. Box 110001  
Juneau, Alaska 99811-0001

Subject: HB 60/SB 58, Repeal of the Alaska Senior Benefits Program

Dear Governor Dunleavy:

Per our mission statement, the Alaska Commission on Aging (ACoA and "the Commission") is in full support of programs that assist older Alaskans to ensure their dignity, independence, and health so that they may enjoy a high quality of life, live safely in their chosen community, as well as to have opportunity to meaningfully participate in their communities and to be valued for their contributions.

Financial security is a serious worry for many older people living on fixed incomes. According to findings from the 2018 Senior Survey, financial security was identified as the #2 ranking concern of seniors living in Alaska today, behind access to health care. Many of the seniors surveyed who struggle with financial security reported having barely sufficient funds to make monthly living expenses, with some being food insecure. In total, we received 3,117 responses from Alaskans age 55 years and older statewide to the survey.

Senior Benefits is a critical component of the Senior Safety Net. It has a proven track record of providing support for older Alaskans whose incomes are simply not enough to pay for food, housing, heat, and health care costs or to cover an emergency need like a boiler repair during the dead of winter. Senior Benefits, reauthorized in 2018, now serves more than 11,400 low-income seniors age 65 and older who depend on this assistance that allow them to live independently in the community.

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.

The risk of living in poverty increases with age, as older people spend down their assets on health care and living expenses. Older Alaskans most likely to benefit from Senior Benefits include seniors who are older than 75; older people living alone; those who have worked low paying jobs being unable to save much while they were working and now receive minimal Social Security benefits; Alaskans who lived subsistence lifestyles in rural and remote communities with little cash income; full-time homemakers and stay-at-home parents who worked outside of the paid workforce; grandparents raising grandchildren living on fixed incomes; and women who have earned less over the course of their working lives with many having outlived their husbands and in the process, exhausted their resources to provide their care.

The Commission supports retaining the Senior Benefits Program in statute in hopes of an improved financial climate for future funding and to ensure that the State does not face an even greater expense from unexpected, cataclysmic changes in senior health and safety due to the loss of this important needs-based program for older Alaskans. The Commission believes 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 represents a higher cost to the family or to the state. Many older people who are disabled and living with compromised health conditions are not able to get a paid job to supplement their income. We look forward to working with your Administration and the Legislature to identify ways to sustain the Senior Benefits Program through cost saving measures as needed.

Thank you for your consideration of these comments. Please contact Denise Daniello, ACoA's Executive Director, at 465-4879 or [denise.daniello@alaska.gov](mailto:denise.daniello@alaska.gov) for further information.

Sincerely,



Gordon Glaser  
Chair, Alaska Commission on Aging

Sincerely,



Mary Shields  
Vice Chair, Alaska Commission on Aging

Copy: Lieutenant Governor Kevin Meyer