



THE STATE
of **ALASKA**
GOVERNOR BILL WALKER

Department of
Health and Social Services

ALASKA COMMISSION ON AGING

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March 22, 2016

Representative Steve Thompson
Alaska Capitol, Room 515
Juneau, Alaska 99801-1182

Regarding: Support CSHB 77, Training Regarding Non-Apparent Disabilities & Voluntary Disability Designations on State Identification Cards and Driver's License

Dear Representative Thompson:

The Alaska Commission on Aging (ACoA) is pleased to renew our support for CSHB 77, as authored by you and co-sponsored by Representatives Gara, Kawasaki, Kito, Saddler, Vazquez, Lynn, Stutes, Wilson, Wool, Keller, Millett, and Neuman. Although this legislation addresses the needs of all Alaskans with disabilities, the ACoA will focus on the "safety" benefits we perceive for older Alaskans from this legislation, particularly those with concealed impairments that may result from physical or cognitive sources.

Older people who experience concealed disabilities are often impacted by the manner in which they respond to sensory stimuli and process information. This behavior can sometimes be misunderstood as resulting from being under the influence of an intoxicant or as purposefully disruptive. For example, hearing loss can result in problems understanding the spoken language and performing complex tasks. Those with anxiety disorders have a tendency to selectively focus and interpret even ambiguous events in a highly threatening way – which can be observed as disruptive behavior. Wandering outside unattended and unprotected is a significant personal safety risk for persons living with Alzheimer's disease and related dementias. Drivers with early stage memory changes are especially likely to minimize the complexity of driving and overestimate their abilities that can lead to unsafe driving. They may also find themselves lost even in familiar surroundings due to diminished short-term memory. Not only do these disabling conditions affect personal safety and the safety of others nearby, but may also impact the outcome of an encounter between a person with a disability and a public safety officer.

The Commission strongly agrees that preserving personal safety and dignity of individuals with disabilities would be greatly improved by having trained public safety officials able to recognize the signs of a person with a disability and have the skills to respond appropriately to them. We greatly appreciate the new requirement as proposed by CSHB 77 for the Alaska Police Standards Council to amend its training curriculum requirements to include training that will enable Alaska police officers, correctional officers, probation officers, and parole officers to recognize people with disabilities, including disabilities that are hidden, to know how to respond appropriately, and possess knowledge about relevant resources that can provide assistance. Disability awareness training will advance use of the "Silver Alert"

system and promote greater awareness among public safety officers about the needs of Alaskans with Alzheimer's disease and other cognitive impairments who have a tendency to wander and become lost, sometimes finding themselves in life-threatening situations. Public safety officers trained in disability awareness will be better able to recognize the signs of a person with dementia in the community and respond appropriately to bring that person to safety.

We thank you for your leadership on CSHB 77 to enhance public safety awareness, improve communication, and increase protection for Alaskans with disabilities.

Sincerely,



Mary E. Shields
Chair, Alaska Commission on Aging

Sincerely,



Denise Daniello
ACoA Executive Director

Cc: Representative Les Gara
Representative Scott Kawasaki
Representative Sam Kito
Representative Dan Saddler
Representative Liz Vazquez
Representative Charisse Millett

Representative Bob Lynn
Representative Louise Stutes
Representative Tammie Wilson
Representative Adam Wool
Representative Wes Keller
Representative Mark Neuman