

STATE OF ALASKA

DEPT. OF HEALTH & SOCIAL SERVICES

Alaska Commission on Aging

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March 28, 2009

The Honorable Paul Seaton, Co-Chair
The Honorable Cathy Muñoz, Co-Chair
House Education Committee
Alaska State Capitol, Rooms 102 and 409
Juneau, AK 99801-1182

Subject: Support for HB 204

Dear Chair Seaton and Chair Muñoz:

The Alaska Commission on Aging (ACoA) encourages support of HB 204, a bill to expand Alaska's participation in the WWAMI Medical School program to increase the supply of doctors needed to meet the growing health care needs of all Alaskans. WWAMI is a unique five-state collaborative program that presently allows 20 Alaskan medical students to enroll. HB 204 would increase the number of slots from 20 to 24 students on July 1, 2010. This bill is authored by Representative Dahlstrom and co-sponsored by Representative Kerttula.

Alaska, as with the rest of the nation, is experiencing a shortage of health care workers, particularly with doctors and nurses. For many doctors in our state, retirement is just around the corner and replacing those experienced medical providers with newly trained doctors is a priority for all Alaskans, and a critical need for people 65 years and older who have various medical conditions.

The Alaska Physician Supply Task Force Report states that Alaska will need nearly twice as many physicians in the next twenty years as it currently has if the state is to meet the expected demands from a growing population of seniors. Similarly, the demand for registered nurses is increasing during a period when many health care professionals are retiring. The pool of qualified medical providers continues to shrink as the demand for services increases.

Alaska now has the highest rate of growth of persons 65 and older in the nation, according to the 2007 report by the U.S. Administration on Aging. This increased growth rate is due to the fact that more Alaska's seniors and high proportion of Baby Boomers are choosing to remain in state following retirement, close to their families and friends, which is made possible by improved health care and home and community based services. Alaska benefits from seniors contributing approximately \$1.6 billion of revenue to the state each year from their retirement pensions, medical payments, and other income in addition to their volunteering, caregiving, and mentoring provided to younger generations. If older Alaskans are unable to find a physician willing to serve them, they may be forced to leave the state in search of access to health care professionals, resulting in a significant financial and social loss for our state.

The Alaska Commission on Aging supported Senator Meyer's bill in 2007 to increase the number of WWAMI slots from ten to twenty. HB 204 offers another meaningful opportunity to increase the number of slots for medical students and for Alaska to prepare for the health care demands of our growing senior population. The University of Washington, which is ranked first in primary care medical schools nationwide and seventh in

geriatrics, not only allows WWAMI medical students to pay in-state tuition, but the program also provides an incentive for those completing medical school to return to Alaska to practice medicine.

ACoA respectfully requests your support of HB 204 to improve primary health care access for all Alaskans, including Alaska seniors. Please feel free to contact Denise Daniello, ACoA's executive director (465-4879), should you have any questions regarding our position. Thank you for your support of this important legislation.

Sincerely,



Sharon Howerton-Clark
Chair, Alaska Commission on Aging

Sincerely,



Denise Daniello
ACoA Executive Director

CC: Representative Buch
Representative Edgmon
Representative Keller
Representative Gardner
Representative Wilson