

STATE OF ALASKA

DEPT. OF HEALTH & SOCIAL SERVICES

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Alaska Commission on Aging

March 2, 2009

The Honorable Kim Elton, Chair
Senate Education Committee
Alaska State Capitol, Room 506
Juneau, AK 99801-1182

Subject: Support for SB 18

Dear Chair Elton:

The Alaska Commission on Aging (ACoA) encourages support of SB 18, a bill to increase Alaska's participation in the WWAMI Medical School program. WWAMI is a unique five-state collaborative program that presently allows 20 Alaskan medical students to enroll. SB 18 would increase the number of slots from 20 to 24 students on July 1, 2010, and to 30 students on July 1, 2012. This bill is authored by Senator Bill Wielechowski and co-sponsored by Senators Ellis, Thomas, and Paskvan.

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. Older Alaskans from many Alaskan communities have reported their inability to find a physician who will accept them as Medicare beneficiaries.

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 increase growth rate is due to the fact that more Alaska seniors are now choosing to remain in state following retirement, close to their families and friends, made possible by improved health care and home and community based services. As a result, Alaska's economy benefits through seniors' contribution of approximately \$1.6 billion of revenue to the state each year from their retirement pensions, other income, as well as medical payments in addition to their volunteering, caregiving, and mentoring 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.

The Alaska Commission on Aging supported Senator Meyer's bill in 2007 to increase the number of WWAMI slots from ten to twenty. SB 18 offers another meaningful opportunity to increase the number of slots for medical students and for our state to prepare for the health care demands of our growing senior population. WWAMI, which is ranked first in primary care medical schools nationwide and seventh in geriatrics, not only allows medical students to pay in-state tuition, but also provides an incentive for those completing medical school to return to Alaska to practice medicine.

ACoA supports SB 18 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: Senator Bettye Davis, Vice Chair
Senator Gary Stevens

Senator Donald Olson
Senator Charlie Huggins

Senator Bill Wielechowski