

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE

News from the Senate and House Majorities

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‘Pioneers’ and Veterans’ Homes Bill Passes **Legislature OKs Beds, Federal Support for Vets in Pilot Program**

(JUNEAU) - Alaska’s veterans would have reserved spaces in state Pioneers’ Homes with a portion of their expenses paid by the federal government, in a three-year pilot project the Legislature approved Monday to evaluate the benefits of changing the assisted living homes to Alaska Pioneers’ and Veterans’ Homes.

“Alaska owes a great debt of gratitude to the veterans and pioneers, in many cases one and the same people, who helped build our state,” said Rep. Eldon Mulder (R-Anchorage), co-chair of the House Finance Committee.

Meeting in special session called to address veterans issues and other matters, the House and Senate passed Senate Bill 2001 to create a pilot project aimed at matching the need for veterans housing in Alaska with the unused capacity in Alaska Pioneers’ Homes.

The bill authorizes the state Department of Administration, which operates Pioneers’ Homes, to reserve a certain percent of beds for veterans, no less than the estimated 19 percent now occupied by those who have served in the U.S. armed services. The bill also authorizes the department to work with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to pay per diem benefits to veterans residing in Alaska Pioneers’ Homes.

“Alaska is fortunate to have more veterans living in our state per capita than in any state of the union,” said Sen. Dave Donley (R-Anchorage) co-chair of the Senate Finance Committee. “This legislation provides us the opportunity to provide for the real needs of veterans and make good use of unused capacity, by considering creating a unique institution, the Alaska Pioneers’ and Veterans’ Homes.”

If the Department of Veterans Affairs agrees to the pilot program, the name of the homes will change to the Alaska Pioneers and Veterans Home for the term of the pilot program. The pilot program would expire June 30, 2005, and the state Department of Administration would report back to the Legislature by Jan. 5, 2005.

There are Pioneers’ Homes in Anchorage, Fairbanks, Juneau, Ketchikan, Palmer, and Sitka. There are currently 95 veterans living in Alaska Pioneers Homes, 46 of whom pay their own costs, and 49 of whom have the cost of their care subsidized by the state.

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“This will not only provide significant financial benefits to those veterans who are now bearing the cost of their living expenses, it will also augment the current level of services and provide a higher quality of care for all veterans residing in the homes,” Mulder said.

Regardless of the outcome of the pilot program, SB 2001 will require the state to cooperate with the federal government on matters pertaining to residents that are veterans, and including veterans’ needs in the recommendations it is required to send to the legislature. The Pioneers’ Home Advisory Board will also change to include representatives of veterans.

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