

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE

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SESSION

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Sponsor Statement

SB 292

“An Act relating to youth courts and to the recommended use of criminal fines to fund the activities of youth courts; and relating to accounting for criminal fines.”

Youth Courts are an effective approach to dealing with the problem of juvenile crime. Since their inception in the 1980s, Alaska’s youth courts have proven to significantly reduce recidivism rates. Through the use of volunteer support, they also save costs in the justice system.

In Alaska, youth courts are used to hear cases involving first time misdemeanors and violations. These courts provide intervention in cases that often do not receive adequate attention in the traditional juvenile justice system. This has proven to prevent many initial cases from developing into serious behavioral and criminal problems later in youth development. Offenders are tried by a jury of their peers, an approach that makes the process a good educational tool for all participants, in addition to being an effective administration of justice. Youth courts relate consequences to actions, encouraging offenders to accept responsibility for their behavior. In the rare cases when an offender repeats a crime, they are referred back to the traditional juvenile justice system. However, Alaska’s youth courts have been very successful in preventing repeat offenses. In Anchorage, for example, the youth court recidivism rate is just 6%, compared to 23% in the traditional system.

Because youth court cases cost 50% less than cases heard in district and superior courts, this approach is very cost effective. Unfortunately, the lack of stable funding now threatens the future of the youth court programs. Grants that pay for office space, training and operating expenses are being significantly reduced in the federal budget. This bill allows the legislature to appropriate funds to youth courts and provides a much-needed source of financial support. SB 292, as a companion bill to Representative Ogg’s HB 303, is a solution that will enable Alaska’s youth courts to continue providing their uniquely effective services to the state.

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