



Senate Majority News

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Alaska Seniors Top Priority in First Week of Session **Thumbs Up for SeniorCare Program**

(Juneau) Legislation to help Alaska's seniors with prescription drug costs has passed committees in both the House and Senate of the Alaska State Legislature.

"This is a continuation of the work we began with the administration last year to devise a plan to channel scarce resources to the seniors in most need of assistance," said Senate President Gene Therriault (R-North Pole). Last year, the Senate looked at basing the Longevity Bonus on need, and ultimately passed a rapid phase-out endorsed by the AARP and Pioneers of Alaska that failed in the House. "This measure combines the proposals the Senate Majority examined last session."

"We hope to have early action on this measure so that seniors can start receiving the benefit sooner rather than later," Therriault said. "This is a fair and affordable alternative to the Longevity Bonus program—which was estimated to cost the State of Alaska \$400 million."

"This is a thoughtful program to provide a one-stop source for all senior services and an interim bridging mechanism to help seniors deal with prescription costs," said Sen. Fred Dyson (R-Eagle River) and chairman of the Senate Health, Education and Social Services Committee.

Representative Peggy Wilson (R-Wrangell) stressed that she is seeking a fair solution for seniors. "We need a fair plan. When some people are receiving benefits who don't require them, while others are in desperate need and can't get help, there is something wrong," she said.

The bills establish the SeniorCare program, which will provide prescription drug subsidies or cash assistance for low-income seniors until the new Medicare prescription drug subsidy administered by the federal government becomes fully effective in 2006. SeniorCare also includes a new Senior Information Office.

Seniors receiving the Alaska Senior Assistance Program can choose to continue receiving the cash assistance of \$120 a month instead of the drug coverage. The Senior Assistance Program cash benefit was only budgeted in the current fiscal year and would end June 30 if the legislature takes no action, but will continue as an option until January 2006 if passed.

House Bill 374 moved out of the House Health, Education and Social Services Committee Tuesday. Senate Bill 259 moved out of the Senate Health, Education and Social Services Committee Wednesday. Both bills now move to the Finance committees.

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