

# Alaskan Seniors Living Longer Growing Stronger

from the Alaska Commission on Aging

January 2001

*The mission of the Alaska Commission on Aging is to ensure dignity and independence for Alaska's seniors and to assist them, through programs and services funded by the Commission, to lead useful and meaningful lives.*



**Alaskan Seniors:  
Living Longer,  
Growing Stronger**  
is a monthly  
publication of the  
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Executive Director  
**Jane P. Demmert**  
P O Box 110209  
Juneau, AK 99811-0209  
(907) 465-3250  
Jane\_Demmert  
@admin.state.ak.us



Alaska's State Capitol building in Juneau.

## Senior-Related Legislation for the Current Session

The 22<sup>nd</sup> Legislature of the State of Alaska began its first session January 8. This is the busy season for advocates seeking to educate policy makers on legislative issues affecting all of us as we age.

This legislative season, the Alaska Commission on Aging has identified the following legislative priorities:

- Establishing a state-funded long-term care program for seniors and adults with long-term care needs whose income and conditions now exclude them from the state's Medicaid long-term care home and community-based services waiver
- Strengthening the state guardianship and conservatorship system
- Strengthening state oversight for assisted living facilities
- Securing inclusion of Alzheimer's and related disorders as an allowable primary diagnosis for coverage under the state Medicaid long-term care waiver for older Alaskans
- Securing passage of budget increments to provide vital assistance to Alaska's rapidly-growing senior community. These increments are found in the budgets of the Division of Senior Services and the Commission, Division of Medical Assistance Medicaid long-term care funding, Alaska Housing Finance Corporation's Senior Housing Program, Alaska's Pioneers' Homes, and the Office of Public Advocacy Guardianship Program

In this issue of *Alaskan Seniors, Living Longer, Growing Stronger*, we'll look at some of these priorities individually.

## **Broadening Alaskans' Access to Home and Community-Based Care**

Many seniors and adults with disabilities cannot pay for all the long-term care services they need, yet still do not qualify to receive Medicaid benefits. When these moderate income Alaskans don't receive necessary health care services, they often end up requiring more intensive services than they would have needed had they received earlier help to stabilize their situation.

The Legislative Long-Term Care Task Force has proposed that the Department of Administration establish and administer a program of home and community-based support services to address this need. The proposed program would begin to address the long-term care needs of adults of all ages, including significant numbers of older Alaskans, who face the following challenges:

- Income levels that exceed allowable income for participation in Alaska's Medicaid long-term care waiver programs
- Medical, physical, or cognitive impairments that place these Alaskans at greatest risk, or who have already been placed in a more restrictive care setting than they desire or need.

The participants in this program would pay for services they receive on a sliding scale. They would be required to apply for payment from all other sources available to them.

## **Strengthening Alaska's Guardianship System**

With funding from the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority, the Division of Senior Services commissioned a review and assessment of Alaska's guardianship system in 1998. The purpose was to take a proactive look at the future of guardianship services in Alaska. The effort to act on the recommendations in this report, mostly involving more funding for guardianship agencies to lighten case loads and providing more support and training to private guardians, began with the release of the report. Legislation is now sought to strengthen Alaska's present statutes concerning guardianship and conservatorship to further assure that the best interests of the ward or respondent (the person being placed in guardianship or conservatorship) are effectively addressed in guardianship cases.

This legislation would serve all individuals for whom a guardianship or conservatorship is being established. This includes significant numbers of older Alaskans. One improvement this legislation would make is to allow a third type of guardianship petition that falls between regular and emergency petitions. This new type would have to be heard by the court sooner than a regular petition, but not in as short a time as an emergency petition is required to be heard.

## **Strengthening State Oversight of Alaska's Assisted Living Facilities**

Across Alaska, the number of assisted living homes now licensed by the Division of Senior Services has grown to 125. This indicates rapid growth in the numbers of older Alaskans choosing to make Alaska their lifelong home. Assisted living offers Alaskans with residential long-term care needs the opportunity to receive that care in home-like settings. After five years under the present assisted living statutes and regulations, more is understood about issues of care, residents' rights, and structures needed to guide providers, the state, clients and their families involved in assisted living. In 1999 and 2000 the state held statewide information and listening forums to gain feedback and perspective on the core issues needing work. Now the state is drafting new regulations and proposed legislation to refine the framework for licensing assisted living. Key areas slated for strengthening:

- Standards and provisions for assisted living employee criminal background checks, and requirements that prohibit facilities from using employees, contractors, or volunteers convicted of offenses listed in regulation.
- Definition of circumstances under which assisted living resident contracts may be terminated, and provisions regarding termination procedures that assure checks and balances for residents and their families.
- Provisions under which the State may revoke an assisted living home's license.

Draft language is expected to include a framework for the state to secure court-ordered temporary administration of an  
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## **Medicaid Coverage for Those With Alzheimer’s Disease Must Improve**

By 2025 an estimated 124,303 Alaskans will be age 65+. Of that population, an estimated 15,700 will be at-risk for Alzheimer’s Disease and related disorders (ADRD). As the number of Alaskans ill with Alzheimer’s increases, it is vital to include Alzheimer’s as an allowable primary diagnosis for Alaskans otherwise eligible for the present Medicaid long-term waiver program. Alaska is one of only two states that exclude seniors with Alzheimer’s from Medicaid funded long-term care services if Alzheimer’s is their primary diagnosis.

The *Legislative Long-Term Care Task Force Report, 1999* recommends exploring ways to support the long-term care needs of Alaskans whose sole diagnosis is Alzheimer’s Disease.

## **Governor Knowles Introduces Legislation for Alaska’s Senior Veterans**

Governor Tony Knowles has introduced legislation expanding the Pioneers’ Home system to provide long-term care for veterans. This proposal has been well received by seniors and veterans. House Bill 88 changes the name of the Pioneers’ Homes to the “Alaska Pioneers’ and Veterans’ Homes.” It authorizes the Department of Administration to establish, through regulation, an admissions preference that would reserve a designated percentage of beds for veterans.

This bill and the accompanying FY 02 budget request will simultaneously increase the Homes’ staffing to provide long-term care to older Alaskans, and enable more aging veterans to receive long-term care in the six Pioneer Homes across the state. The funding includes nearly \$2.5 million in general funds and another \$2.6 million in receipt authority. Receipts include fees paid by residents, and potential payments for veterans’ care through the federal Veterans Administration.

The proposal also requests \$200,000 to survey veterans’ housing and health needs to help guide the state in future planning for the Homes. The state will ask the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to examine the possibility of placing VA clinics at the Homes.

A companion bill would establish the Alaska Veterans Advisory Council. It would make recommendations concerning veterans’ priority service needs, develop public and private partnerships to meet those needs, and provide coordination of information regarding veterans’ benefits and services around the state. The chair of the council would serve on the renamed Alaska Pioneers’ and Veterans’ Home Advisory Board.

## **Alaska Commission on Aging Will Meet in February**

The Alaska Commission on Aging will hold its quarterly meeting February 13-15. The meeting will be held in Juneau at Centennial Hall.

Among the issues to be addressed, the Commissioners plan to review the Seniors’ Economic Impact Study commissioned last year, assess the impact of the reauthorization provisions of the Older Americans Act, and finalize the timeframe for new fiscal year extensions of grants, and awards of new grants. The Commission will also adopt a timeframe and process for completing its “Interim State Plan” to guide its programs supported with Older Americans Act funding. Time will be scheduled for discussion with local senior advocacy organizations, and meetings with legislators.

Those wishing to offer public comment on issues pertinent to the wellbeing of older Alaskans are invited to attend the Commission meeting at Centennial Hall. The meeting schedule is now being finalized.

### **Assisted Living (continued from page 2.)**

assisted living facility if that facility operates without a license, the health, safety or welfare of residents were jeopardized, or if a pattern of statute, regulation or local ordinance violation had occurred. Also anticipated are specific training requirements for assisted living administrators.

