



Alaska State Legislature House and Senate Democrats

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Senate Majority Leaves Holes in SeniorCare Democratic Legislators try to fix flaws in temporary program

JUNEAU – Senate Democrats today tried to fix fundamental flaws in Governor Frank Murkowski's proposed SeniorCare program. Four amendments to the bill, each supported by members of the Democratic caucus, were offered on the Senate Floor during final legislative debate. Republican lawmakers rebuffed each amendment.

Senator Gretchen Guess (D-Anchorage) offered an amendment to remove the "sunset" provision of the bill. "These are our neediest seniors," said Sen. Guess. "Why would we create a program today just to take it away tomorrow?" Republican lawmakers did not answer. They silently voted against the amendment.

Senator Johnny Ellis (D-Anchorage) offered an amendment to remove the "pro rata" language from the bill. "The SeniorCare bill allows the Department of Health & Social Services to reduce payment to beneficiaries of the program," said Sen. Ellis. "There is no certainty, especially in light of the governor's veto of the Longevity Bonus program, that seniors will receive what this bill spells out. 'Pro rata' means uncertainty."

Senator Hollis French (D-Anchorage) offered an amendment to repeal the marriage penalty in the bill. "A married couple would receive less assistance than an unmarried couple across the street," said Sen. French. "This bill dangles a \$10,000 incentive for married couples to get divorced to pay the bills."

And Senator Georgianna Lincoln (D-Rampart) offered an amendment to increase time seniors could spend out of state from 30 to 60 days. Senator Lincoln said, "We should show some compassion and allow seniors on extremely limited income sufficient time to drive or fly to tend to family affairs in the Lower 48."

Additionally, Senator Kim Elton (D-Juneau) moved to include a letter of intent with the bill. The letter called for Department of Health & Social Services to inform eligible Alaska seniors of the revised federal poverty level guidelines. Senator Elton argued that there are Alaskans who may not currently qualify but may become eligible when the guidelines are revised in April 2004.

The good news is this bill makes things slightly better for vulnerable seniors. The bad news is it is only temporary, it could be underfunded or ignored by future legislatures, and it codifies a marriage penalty.

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Sen. Bettye Davis, Sen. Johnny Ellis, Sen. Kim Elton, Sen. Lyman Hoffman, Sen. Hollis French, Sen. Gretchen Guess, Sen. Georgianna Lincoln, Sen. Donny Olson, Rep. Ethan Berkowitz, Rep. Sharon Cissna, Rep. Harry Crawford, Rep. Eric Croft, Rep. Les Gara, Rep. Max Gruenberg, Rep. David Guttenberg, Rep. Reggie Joule, Rep. Mary Kapsner, Rep. Beth Kerttula, Rep. Albert Kookesh, Rep. Carl Moses