

# Will you want to stay in Alaska?

## COMPASS: Points of view from the community

**By: Representative Sharon M. Cissna**  
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Echoing throughout the state every day are stories people tell of why they made Alaska home. The question and answer is uniquely important to Alaskans.

### WHY WE CAME

My own core group of friends came and then developed close and lasting friendships mixed with a commitment to the community. The children born and raised here often choose to stay and start families. Extended family members have been lured to the state. Parents come with their savings accounts and pensions to live here as well.

Through the years, the improvements and increases add to an already great place to live. An evolving health system has become sophisticated, shopping has improved, as have choices in entertainment, access to recreation, bike trails, hiking, fishing, hunting and ski trails. Each one of these improvements creates jobs that give our economy some measure of independence from government reliance. Alaska is a uniquely attractive place to live.

### CLOUDS ON THE HORIZON

It is difficult to imagine that the hard-won improvements, such as health care, local jobs based on local services, opportunities for small businesses, and an attractive place for seniors would now be the primary target for state government cuts. Our steady growth has brought people who need local jobs and good health care. Recent growth in health costs stains a health system that took years to become competitive with Outside services. It is therefore especially unfortunate that recent cuts in state health expenditures could add to an already strained system.

Alaska leads the nation in alcoholism, tobacco use, fetal alcohol damage and suicide. These are chronic challenges to our health care system. Yet state government cuts target the poorest of the poor, seniors, children and nonprofit safety net providers. Most critically, these cuts eliminate prevention programs, which will guarantee steeply accelerating costs in the near future.

### WHY HEALTH CUTS AFFECT YOU

1) Access and the affordability of health care: The recent U.S. census reports about 19.3 percent of Alaskans have no health insurance (the U.S. average is 14 percent.) For every person who is uninsured, the general health costs go up. Studies have shown that when people lose health insurance, they postpone medical care until it warrants an emergency room visit. This is what crowds our emergency rooms, slows service at a critical time and increases costs for everyone.

2) Health care related jobs: The Alaska Department of Labor reports the growth of private sector jobs each year. In the past decade one of the largest job growth sectors has been in health. Yet the state's role in health care financing and delivery has been dramatically altered within the past few months with unknown consequences.

3) Growing community impact: Unless we reaffirm our commitment to heal Alaska's chronic health problems, the homeless and sick in our urban centers will grow as small rural communities lose their ability to cope. The state's public health and safety are at risk.

Why we came to Alaska and what made us stay differs for each one of us. Yet together, community-by-community, we have been building our own unique quality of life. State government cuts are ultimately a decision of how livable Alaska will be. Alaskans have fought hard for local jobs, for accessible and affordable health care, and for safety.

Will the Alaska of the future be a state where people will want to come and stay?

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