

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE

House Majority News

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Legislature Provides for Public Safety

By Rep. Brian Porter

As Alaskans plan their final end-of summer camping trips, cookouts or other outings, they can take comfort in knowing that our public safety agencies are also gearing up by placing extra officers on duty and getting ready to deal with drunken drivers, stranded hikers, capsized boats - any of the hazards of living and playing in Alaska.

But while public awareness of danger tends to peak on holiday weekends, threats to public safety continue throughout the year. That's why the state Legislature took several significant steps last session aimed at protecting Alaskans not just on holidays, but all year long.

The Alaska State Troopers are the first line of defense for much of Alaska, and this year we added six new Troopers to improve their coverage of Talkeetna, Bethel, Anchorage, Nome and Kotzebue as part of a significant boost to the department's budget. We also added two new Fish and Wildlife Protection officers in Girdwood and Wrangell, helping protect our citizens and our resources.

Recognizing the importance of Village Public Safety Officers in ensuring the safety of rural residents, we passed Senate Bill 145. Sponsored by Sen. Rick Halford (R-Chugiak), the bill increases the services that VPSOs can offer to their communities, expands employee benefits to help retain experienced officers, and establishes new regional positions responsible for supervising and training the VPSO force.

Many Alaskans have come to depend on 911 for emergency assistance, and cell phones have made it even easier for us to call in the cavalry. But while regular phone users help bear the cost of 911 services, it took passage of House Bill 186, sponsored by Rep. Kevin Meyer (R-Anchorage), to let cell phone users also help support and improve the 911 system that keeps emergency assistance just a phone call away.

Substance abuse is a danger to Alaskans of all ages, and the Legislature passed three House bills that specifically address substance abuse and related illegal activities. The House Judiciary Committee, chaired by Rep. Norman Rokeberg (R-Anchorage) sponsored House Bill 179 to ensure appropriate punishment of minors who consume alcohol, and House Bill 132, which both tightens anti-bootlegging laws and lowers drivers' legal blood alcohol content to 0.08 percent.

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House Bill 172, which I sponsored, employs an innovative approach to dealing with repeat drunken drivers. It creates therapeutic courts in Anchorage and Bethel that can mandate extensive substance abuse treatment and court monitoring, plus craving-reducing medicines, to help offenders break the cycle of substance abuse and help keep the streets safe for all drivers.

In addition to passing bills that help keep you safe and combat illegal activity, the Legislature provided new resources for our law enforcement agencies to use when working to identify and convict criminals.

Senate Bill 99, sponsored by Sen. Halford, lets the state collect genetic samples from convicted burglars, expanding the databanks used to identify those who may commit violent crimes. House Bill 210, sponsored by Rep. Meyer, takes advantages of improved DNA testing technology to allow prosecution of felony sexual assaults without a statute of limitations. We put teeth into these new DNA laws by providing funding for three new workers at the new state of the art crime lab, including an additional genetic testing specialist.

Sen. Halford also sponsored Senate Bill 105, which creates an Office of Victim's Rights and provides a state Victim's Advocate. Our legal system is designed to apprehend and convict offenders, and is often confusing and isolating for crime victims. The members of the Legislature understand that people dealing with the emotional aftermath of a violent crime cannot always advocate for themselves, and this new office will ensure their rights are protected.

Through the efforts of Alaska's senators and representatives, our state's emergency response and law enforcement agencies are ready to serve and protect you year-round. While we never expect to need these services, all Alaskans can feel safer knowing they are ready and waiting.

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Brian Porter is Speaker of the Alaska House of Representatives, and a retired chief of the Anchorage Police Department.