

Alaska State Legislature

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House Bill Emphasizes Work Over Welfare **HB 402 Redirects Programs to Guide Recipients to Independence**

(JUNEAU) – Alaska’s welfare programs would more vigorously guide recipients away from dependence on cash benefits and toward employment and self-sufficiency, under a bill passed by the House today.

“House Bill 402 provides authorization for a significant, if not profound, cultural shift in how we assist people in our state,” said Rep. Fred Dyson (R-Eagle River), who introduced the measure as chair of the House Health, Education and Social Services Committee. “It is literally ‘work first.’ It reorients people to the path that leads to a job.”

While federal welfare reform in 1994 replaced guaranteed lifetime benefits with a 60-month lifetime limit, Alaska was one of many states concerned as many recipients began exhausting their benefits without finding work. Last year the Oregon-based Institute for Full Employment, which had succeeded in leading more than half of Oregon’s welfare recipients to employment, volunteered to see if Oregon’s successes might be repeated in Alaska.

Following a performance audit of the state Division of Public Assistance, the Institute made recommendations that form the basis of HB 402. The major elements of the bill call for Alaska to:

- Develop a program to help families away from dependency on welfare benefits;
- Reallocate some food and cash assistance funds into subsidizing wages to encourage employment of those able to work, and to continue to provide community service opportunities for those unable to work;
- Work with the private sector to identify opportunities for wage-subsidized jobs to give recipients work experience, and use the labor market as the best test of employability;
- Work to help families achieve self-sufficiency by building on family strengths;
- Emphasize that public assistance is more about jobs than benefits.

“While the Department of Public Assistance has made strides in the application of welfare reform, lessons have been learned and insight has been gained that led us to propose this tune-up of public assistance,” Dyson said. “This bill is an example of the principle that the best welfare program is a job.”

[HB 402](#) moves next to the Senate for consideration.

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