

Alaska State Legislature

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Representative Jay Ramras House District 10

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Ramras Introduces Infant Hearing Screening Bill

(JUNEAU) – Earlier this week, Representative Jay Ramras (R-Fairbanks) introduced House Bill 109, aimed at ensuring that all infants born in Alaska have their hearing screened at birth, or within 30 days of birth, if not born in a hospital.

Hearing impairment has been shown to be the most common disability in newborns, affecting 3 in every 1,000 babies. Once at risk infants have been identified, this bill will then serve to assist parents of at risk children with appropriate, available follow-up care. Finally, the legislation will require the Department of Health and Social Services to prepare a report to the Governor detailing the program's needs and success.

“When children are not identified and served early, special education for a child with a hearing loss may cost an additional \$420,000, and deafness has an estimated lifetime cost of approximately \$1 million per individual. These savings in special education costs will pay for universal newborn hearing screening many times over,” said Representative Ramras.

Statistics show that in Alaska, 30 to 40 babies are born each year with some type of congenital hearing defect. Further studies have shown that children with hearing impairment not detected at birth, will not be detected, until 2-3 years of age, and that the most critical period for speech and language development is from birth to three years of age.

38 states have enacted legislation requiring hospitals to implement newborn hearing and screening programs. Currently, newborn hearing screening is not mandated and the screening, reporting and follow-up is not institutionalized in facilities across the state. Alaska remains in the “unsatisfactory” category when rated nationally on this issue.

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