

Sponsor Statement

HB 451

Alaska Court System

2/19/04

[HB 451](#) extends the termination dates for two pilot therapeutic court programs until after a planned study of those courts has been completed and reviewed by the legislature. The bill also removes a sunset clause on the Anchorage superior court judge position that was added, in part, to administer one of those therapeutic courts.

In 2001 the legislature passed [HB 172](#), which established felony-level therapeutic courts in Anchorage and Bethel. Each court was set up as a pilot program scheduled to run for three years. The Anchorage court admits those with a felony conviction for driving under the influence of an alcoholic beverage, inhalant, or controlled substance (DUI). The Bethel court admits those convicted of either felony DUI or certain felony drug offenses. The findings section of HB 172 explained the purposes of these courts:

The purposes of therapeutic courts are lasting sobriety of offenders, protection of society from alcohol-related and drug-related crime, prompt payment of restitution to victims of crimes, effective interaction and use of resources among criminal justice and community agencies, and long-term reduction of costs relating to arrest, trial, and incarceration.

In order to determine the effectiveness of these courts the Judicial Council was charged with evaluating them and publishing a study for legislative review. Unfortunately, both the Anchorage and Bethel programs sunset long before the evaluation is scheduled to be completed and, because the report is to be published in July, many months more before the legislature has an opportunity to review that evaluation. If the legislature looks at the evaluation study and decides that the programs should continue, it will be too late; both programs would have ended more than a year earlier.

In order to fix this problem, HB 451 extends the termination date of the pilot programs until after the legislature has had an opportunity to review their effectiveness.

House Bill 451 also removes a sunset clause in HB 172 that will terminate the Anchorage superior court judge position that was added by that bill. The new judge was necessary not only to do the work of the therapeutic court but also to help absorb the growing felony caseload in Anchorage. The sunset clause will take effect this summer at the same time the therapeutic court program is scheduled to end. Not only will that mean the end of the felony therapeutic court, it will also mean that Anchorage will have one less judge for other superior court work. The therapeutic court judge in Anchorage spends most of her time on general superior court work unrelated to therapeutic court cases. If we lose the judicial position it will impact all superior court cases in Anchorage.

The loss of a superior court judge in Anchorage will return us to the number of judges initially established in 1984. Since that time the felony caseload in Anchorage has increased approximately 100%. We simply cannot afford to lose a superior court position in Anchorage and to return to a level of judicial coverage that was appropriate 20 years ago.

Thank you for your consideration of this bill.