



THE STATE
of **ALASKA**
GOVERNOR BILL WALKER

Department of Health and Social Services

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SLA2016 DHSS Guidelines for Legislative Communications

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Throughout the year, but especially during the legislative session, legislators or their aides will contact Department of Health and Social Services staff for information.

Frequently the DHSS legislative liaison is contacted first, and will work with the pertinent division to generate a response. Sometimes legislators or aides contact division staff directly. In either event, DHSS strives to provide responses in a timely and professional manner and to report communications as soon as possible to the directors' and commissioner's offices. Substantive policy and program inquiries also must be reported to the governor's legislative office.

Please follow these guidelines:

If a legislator or legislative staff contact you directly with a budget-related inquiry:

- Forward the inquiry by e-mail to the HSS budget section mailbox: hss.budgetleglog@alaska.gov with a cc to anthony.newman@alaska.gov and sarah.woods2@alaska.gov. The budget section will respond directly back to the legislator. Routing all financial-related inquiries to the budget section helps ensure we are providing consistent answers and dollar figures.
- All information requests that emerge from House or Senate Finance committees and subcommittee hearings are assumed to be budget-related and are routed through the HSS budget section.

If a legislator or legislative staff contact you directly with a non-budget related inquiry for:

- Information that is not readily available to you, is on a **topic that is controversial, requires research,** or involves a **department policy or position:**
 - Notify the department legislative liaison, your division legislative contact, supervisor, and/or division director to determine how to respond. In most cases a written response will be provided back to the legislator through the DHSS legislative liaison.
 - If you are not sure whether a topic fits these categories, err on the side of caution and consult with the department legislative liaison, your division legislative contact, supervisor, and/or division director before responding.
- If a legislator or legislative staff contact you for routine **public** information such as **reports, facts, figures, program details, or individual constituent concerns** that are within your area of expertise:
 - Provide information as soon as possible (rule of thumb: if it's on the web, it's public). An example of routine public information would be eligibility guidelines for a particular program.
 - Send the DHSS legislative communication summary (attached) to the DHSS legislative liaison, commissioner, deputy commissioners and division contacts listed on the bottom of the form. The legislative communication summary is specific to each division; your division legislative contact will have the form for your division. The division legislative contact is the designated point person in your division on legislative-related matters. Please keep in mind:
 - The summary is critical to keeping key department staff apprised of information relayed to legislators; allows the commissioner's office to support the divisions; and ensures that the department provides consistent information.
 - Timeliness is key. It is more important to send a brief summary of your communications with legislators than to send a written "report" that arrives days later. Try to send the summary the same day as the communication occurs. Even if you don't have time to write all the details, it is beneficial for the department to know basics such as name of legislator and topic of concern.
 - You do not need to send a summary for each communication if you've had or anticipate several conversations about the particular subject. Note the communication is likely to be ongoing on the form.

If a legislator or legislative staff contact you directly for comments or recommendations on potential or current legislation:

- Always check in with the DHSS legislative liaison before providing a response. The department has a formal process for logging and providing feedback on legislation, including that in draft form, through the ELMO database. **Please do not provide your personal opinion on the merits of legislation.** The department arrives at its position on bills in coordination with the governor's office. If you provide your personal opinion it could be construed as the department position and may conflict with the governor's position.
- Always inform your legislative liaison and your division legislative contact if you are asked to participate in a meeting on potential legislation. In most instances program staff should not meet on legislation without the director, division legislative contact and/or DHSS legislative liaison present.

If the governor's office or someone from Alaska's congressional delegation contacts you directly:

- Employees other than commissioners or directors should coordinate with their division legislative contacts on a response. Legislative contacts: please inform the DHSS legislative liaison about the inquiry before transmitting the response.

Inquiries through the DHSS legislative liaison: Legislators, staff or the governor's office frequently request information through the DHSS legislative liaison that requires input from divisions. The liaison tracks these through the ComTrAK database and assigns to the legislative contact person in the appropriate division. Other division staff may be asked to assist with the response.

Initiating contact with legislators or staff: Employees other than directors, commissioners (deputy and assistant) or division legislative contacts should not initiate communication or meetings *on official department business* without checking first with their director and the DHSS legislative liaison.

Responses to legislators:

Generally, substantive responses are best provided in writing so we have documentation of exactly what was transmitted. Inquiries posed through formal correspondence (signed letter) are best responded to in kind.

Please allow the legislative liaison to be the department's spokesperson to legislators and their staff. Routing emails and other correspondence to the legislature through the DHSS legislative liaison helps ensure that responses are consistent and enables the commissioner's office to remain aware of particular legislators' interests and concerns. We appreciate your cooperation with this practice.

The DHSS legislative liaison and the budget section copy the commissioner and the staff of the governor's legislative office (GLO) on emails to legislators about substantive policy, financial, or programmatic issues. The DHSS legislative liaison also cc's other members of the leadership team

as appropriate to the subject matter. The GLO is not cc'd on communications regarding a single constituent's concerns or housekeeping matters such as scheduling, attendance at hearings, etc.

Formal correspondence (signed letters on administration stationery) and presentations (PowerPoints) intended for transmission to a legislative office, committee, or agency (such as Legislative Research) require review and approval from the GLO before they are transmitted. Factor in a day or two of lead time to get this approval if the letter or presentation is time-sensitive.

The best person to respond: These guidelines are not a gag order on employees. Staff should always feel empowered to answer legislative inquiries that are within their expertise/position. If an employee does not know the answer, feels uncomfortable answering, or the questions have to do with a difficult policy issue, the employee should ask their supervisor and/or division legislative contact to follow up with the DHSS legislative liaison.

Speaking on your own behalf: Employees always have the right to speak to legislative offices on their own time about any matter, as does any other citizen. However, if employees wish to offer personal opinions on legislation or testify before committees, they should put in for leave to do so if it is during regular working hours. If testifying before a committee on your own behalf, clearly state that you are not representing the department. Do not list your affiliation with the department when you sign up for public testimony.