



BERTA'S BRIEFINGS

REPRESENTATIVE BERTA GARDNER

Serving Geneva Woods, College Village, Green Acres, Tudor, Taku & Campbell Park

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Why Do We Spend More on Prisons Than We Do on Scholarships?

Dear Friends and Neighbors,

Last week Chief Justice Walter Carpeneti spoke with the legislature about making the Alaska court system both cost-effective and justice-effective. Alaska has one of the highest incarceration rates in the US and we know that most of those incarcerated have committed offenses in connection with substance abuse.

The Chief Justice said, "We need to reserve the most intense, and costly services for the most intense cases, and to fully explore alternative, less intensive problem-solving solutions for cases that don't demand full throttle attention." The new initiatives include efforts to decrease chronic delay in criminal cases and to provide better rehabilitation to those released so that they are less likely to end up back in jail.

Prisons in Alaska, he said, have a high number of inmates with substance abuse or mental health problems and a lack of programs to help these people overcome and stay out of the system. In response, Alaska has introduced new programs to help those with substance abuse and addiction problems both in jail and after they get out. Graduates of one program have told the Chief Justice: "The program works, you hate it at first, I hated it every day, you fight hard, but you've got to change your thinking, and this is the way to do it. We need that program."



Senator Ellis and I recently held a constituent meeting at Tudor Elementary. It is always a pleasure seeing you and hearing what is on your mind during this time.

The Chief Justice also announced that the entire state was now connected online by CourtView, which makes it easier for everyone to accomplish court related business, from finding information to paying for tickets.

These are things the justice system is doing right now to try to improve the court and prison systems in Alaska, but more needs to be done. As Sen. Johnny Ellis points out in his Compass piece on prison reform, offender rehabilitation programs receive paltry funding from the state and this years' budget includes no increase for treatment programs.

The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world with Russia coming in second. Though we have less than 5 percent of the world's population, the U.S. has almost a quarter of the world's prisoners.

The cost to handle Alaska prisoners is astronomical and takes away from such critical needs as education and roads. For example, just the new \$240 million Mat-Su prison alone is estimated to cost about \$50 million a year to operate, along with \$17.8 million in annual lease payments.

Clearly, we can reduce the incarceration rate by finding less costly ways to monitor non-violent prisoners as well as provide effective substance abuse treatment programs. Please let me know if you have any common sense ideas.

I'm Berta and I'm still listening,



Berta
