

## **Savannah Fletcher, Senate District R**

1. As you have read in the news, the Alaska Division of Public Assistance has had chronic understaffing leading to a significant delay in individuals receiving critical supports such as Medicaid and SNAP ("food stamps"). How would you streamline eligibility requirements and program performance so people with disabilities can get and keep necessary services and benefits such as Medicaid, food assistance, and housing assistance?

**Ensuring that vulnerable Alaskans have access to essential resources through Medicaid and SNAP programs is critically important. Alaskans cannot afford to wait months for such basic and critical services. The passage of HB344 earlier this year marked a big step forward in expanding access to food stamps and healthcare for Alaskans, as well as reducing paperwork to keep applications moving through the system. Outside of HB344, we need to resolve the ongoing staffing issues within the Division of Public Assistance by funding more positions and providing a pension so we can attract and retain workers. Additionally, we need to make our renewal and application systems more accessible with more options for renewal both online, in-person, by mail, and with help over the phone.**

**The State automatically renewed many Alaskans receiving public benefits during the pandemic, and such practices should be encouraged so that the State's backlog doesn't harm families with legal rights to these supports.**

2. Alaskans with disabilities support a system in which each person directs their own supports, based on their strengths and abilities, toward a meaningful life in their home, their job and their community. How will you protect and support the rights of individuals with disabilities so that they can make informed decisions about their own healthcare and personal wellbeing, ensuring autonomy and access to necessary services?

**As a civil rights attorney, I have spent my career working to support and protect the rights of Alaskans, including those with disabilities. I will continue to advocate for policies that protect the rights of individuals with disabilities to access high-quality care and make informed decisions about their own healthcare needs. I've seen this need firsthand when it comes to guardians — I will ensure our laws are clear that OPA cannot switch a ward's guardian from OPA to a private guardian with no notice to the ward and with no hearing. When OPA did this for hundreds of guardians, moving them to Cache Integrity Services, it led to terrible and downright dangerous outcomes for wards.**

3. Individuals placed under court-appointed guardianship are adults who rely on their guardian to ensure they are housed, and their most basic needs are met. The guardian is also responsible for ensuring protected persons receive public benefits, on which protected persons typically depend. Currently, there is a lack of qualified guardians in the State of Alaska. What are your ideas for solving the guardianship crisis?

**The lack of qualified guardians in Alaska is an urgent crisis. Our public guardians are overworked and unable to provide the care that vulnerable Alaskans need, and we risk burnout for the guardians that are still here. Lack of guardians also means that vulnerable Alaskans may stay in hospitals longer than medically necessary, shifting the burden to our hospital systems. As a state senator, I would support increased funding not only to hire more guardians, but to invest in community and institutional training partnerships to create a pipeline of prepared, committed guardians invested in serving Alaskans long term. By spreading out the burden and finding more programs to provide conservatorship services, I think this can help free up more capacity in our qualified guardians.**

4. The Department of Justice has found reasonable cause to believe that the State of Alaska violates the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) by failing to provide community-based services to children with behavioral health disabilities, relying instead on segregated, out-of-state institutional settings - specifically, psychiatric hospitals and psychiatric residential treatment facilities. What is your vision to support in-state mental health services which support children with behavioral health disabilities and their families?

**The shipping out of our youth to out-of-state residential treatment facilities is a major problem that I have spent years working on as an attorney with the Northern Justice Project. Right now, we have major gaps in the community-based services available, especially in rural areas (including much of my District). I support expanding school-based behavioral health services and coordinating with community-based service providers, tribal stakeholders, and local governments to support implementation. I'll support increased funding for projects that provide community-based support for our youth, like Presbyterian Hospitality House which is completing a new facility in Fairbanks. I will also push to ensure that kinship care providers for foster youth are compensated for their care, because I see a number of youth end up in these institutional settings when there are not therapeutic foster homes or safe relatives available in their community.**

5. Children with disabilities who attend our state schools often need to have adjustments made to their schedules and/or the education services they received (accommodations) as well as modifications to the curriculum used to teach them to receive an equitable and appropriate education. What steps will you take to improve education for students with disabilities, including ensuring proper accommodations and modifications within the classroom, increasing parental involvement in the Individualized Education Program process, and raising awareness of the rights of students under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act?

**Our schools need more funding, and until they receive it I fear we will not see schools providing sufficient IEP services. As an assembly member, I funded additional kindergarten aides so at least our youngest students wouldn't feel the hurt of increasing class sizes. As a state senator, I'll advocate for an increase to the BSA. In order to provide a high-quality education for students with disabilities, schools need funding to hire enough teachers, aides, and paraprofessionals. I'd also support providing extra resources and training for educators on how to partner with parents in IEP implementation and how to appropriately educate students in the least restrictive environment possible, especially for students with autism — an area where I see our schools especially failing students. In addition to a BSA increase, we also need to fund more housing in rural communities so the support staff and professionals providing these services have a place to live in the community they work.**