



West

THE COUNCIL OF STATE GOVERNMENTS

Alaska State Visit

CSG West Director Edgar Ruiz, along with staff member Jeff Miller, visited the Alaska State Capitol in Juneau from March 5-7, during a week when lawmakers were considering budget amendments. After multiple special sessions extended the normal 90-day session to over 200 days last year, legislators seemed eager to finish this year with only a short extension of the regular session. Despite a busy legislative schedule, CSG West staff were able to meet with nearly all members or their staff.

One of the challenges mentioned by some legislators is addressing concerns related to recent reforms to the state's criminal justice system. In 2016, the legislature passed [Senate Bill 91](#) aimed at reducing the growth of the state's prison population and cut costs by focusing on rehabilitation and prevention, and reducing sentences for all but the most serious crimes. But the overhaul coincided with an increase in crime in Anchorage, the state's largest city, which has citizens and some legislators questioning this approach. Last year the governor signed [SB 54](#), which was aimed at addressing some of the concerns of SB 91. Although some are still advocating for repeal of the original bill, no sentencing-related legislation has yet passed this year.

As of early April, six bills and one resolution have passed both chambers of the legislature and been sent to the governor, with one more bill and two resolutions awaiting transmittal. Four bills have been signed into law, including a supplemental budget aimed at covering expenses while comprehensive budget negotiations continue. One of the bills awaiting transmittal, [SB 6](#), removes industrial hemp from Alaska's list of controlled substances and allows for commercial farming of hemp.

Last year's session ended without a long-term solution for the budget challenges facing Alaska. This year the Senate Finance Committee introduced [SB 196](#), which would cap unrestricted general fund spending at \$4.1 billion. The limit does not apply to the Alaska Permanent Fund or the Permanent Fund Dividends (PFD) paid annually to eligible Alaskans from that fund. The Permanent Fund is an investment fund supported largely through payments from oil and gas companies. SB 196 was sent to the House on March 28. On April 2, the House passed its budget bill, HB 286, which largely maintains spending for essential services and authorizes a \$1,600 PFD payment to Alaskan residents -- \$500 more than last year, but less than the current statutory formula would have delivered. The budget bill now goes to the Senate for consideration.



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There are several new members that joined the legislature. Representative John Lincoln of Kotzebue, Vice President of Lands for NANA Regional Corporation, was sworn in on January 31. Mike Shower of Wasilla, a pilot for FedEx and a former pilot and Lieutenant Colonel in the U.S. Air Force, was appointed on February 22 to the seat vacated by former Senator Mike Dunleavy. Finally, Representative Tiffany Zulkosky of Bethel was sworn in on March 9. Rep. Zulkosky is Vice President of Communications at the Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation. She holds the distinction of having been Bethel's youngest-ever Mayor, at 24.