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## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### OMBUDSMAN INVESTIGATES PUBLIC ASSISTANCE BACKLOG, RECOMMENDS INCREASED STAFF RESOURCES

May 7, 2018 JUNEAU — Alaska State Ombudsman Kate Burkhart has concluded a systemic investigation of the Division of Public Assistance’s (DPA) backlog of applications for Food Stamp, Medicaid and other benefits. The Ombudsman also investigated complaints related to a lack of effective communication with the public and about the Long-Term Care Unit. The Ombudsman made seven recommendations to the Department of Health and Social Services for addressing the problems investigated. The agency agreed with all seven recommendations and has begun implementation of several recommended strategies.

In 2016-2017, the Ombudsman received more than 400 complaints about DPA. Most complainants sought help communicating with DPA about their benefits. The second most frequent complaint was related to determining the status of an application for, or recertification of eligibility for, Medicaid and Food Stamps (SNAP). Delayed payment of benefits was the third most frequent complaint.

The Ombudsman initiated an investigation of three allegations:

- **Contrary to Law:** The Division of Public Assistance does not meet mandated timelines for processing applications and recertifications for program benefits as required by state and federal law.
- **Unreasonable:** The Division of Public Assistance does not consistently respond to telephone calls, emails, or other forms of communication from the public.
- **Performed Inefficiently:** The Division of Public Assistance’s processing model for managing clients’ long-term care cases is inefficient and ineffective.

Based on the information and evidence collected during the investigation, and the outcomes of complaints about DPA investigated since 2016, the Ombudsman found all three allegations **justified**.

“It is clear from the many complaints we’ve resolved over the past few years, as well as what we learned during this investigation, that most DPA staff are working hard to serve Alaskans,” said Ombudsman Burkhart. “DPA has deployed multiple backlog reduction strategies. DPA supervisors are using every resource to manage the workflow in real time, and Department leadership has invested in efforts to streamline processes. Even with all that effort, our

investigation showed that DPA needs additional staff and some changes to their work process if they are going to resolve these problems.”

The Ombudsman made seven recommendations to address the backlog, lack of communications capacity, and inefficiencies in the long-term care unit:

- Increase staff capacity to meet workload demands,
- Strengthen quality assurance processes,
- Improve document management practices,
- Create a “document hub” to centralize receipt, processing, and filing of documents,
- All DPA offices have accurate caller ID,
- Address obstacles to recruitment and retention, and
- Implement a case management model for the Long-Term Care Unit.

The Ombudsman worked with agency leadership and staff, as well as system stakeholders, to identify practical strategies for implementing these recommendations. The Department is already putting some of these strategies into action by requesting additional DPA eligibility technician staff, dedicating human resources staff to assist DPA with staff recruitment, and actively partnering with Code for America to develop an online benefits application. DPA has also begun the move to a case management model for complex long-term care Medicaid cases.

The full report of the investigation, with recommendations and strategies for addressing the issues causing these types of complaints, is available at <http://ombud.alaska.gov/case-summaries/>.

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