

GOVERNOR'S COUNCIL ON DISABILITIES AND SPECIAL EDUCATION



2024 ANNUAL REPORT



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Letter from Jena Crafton, Council Chair

I am excited to share that in 2024 I have grown more confident as a self-advocate, and I have empowered others to use their voice. The Governor’s Council on Disabilities and Special Education (Council or GCDSE) continues to be led by self-advocates. I am proud to lead the council as Chair with Sabrina Richmond, Vice-Chair, beside me.

This year was about building strong relationships with those that represent me. It is important to know your legislators so that your voice is included, and you don’t feel isolated. In February during our visit to Juneau, I felt like I built strong relationships with my senators and representatives. I was also introduced on the Senate floor of our state capitol and invited to sit in the gallery to listen to U.S Senator Murkowski’s annual address to Alaska legislators.

I was able to see the Senator again and Alaska’s other congressional delegates when I traveled to Washington D.C. I went to the nation’s capital multiple times this year. Each time was amazing. Seeing all the monuments was really fascinating. I liked seeing the Lincoln Memorial and Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial. Both men were advocates and leaders for many people, just like how I want to be for people with intellectual disabilities. During one trip to D.C., we were invited to meet with the President’s staff at the White House to discuss transportation, Direct Support Professionals (DSPs), and employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

One of my favorite presentations this year was being a speaker on the “I Have Dreams” panel at the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority’s Improving Lives Conference This was a panel of self-advocates that share the importance of having rights and dreams. It has made me think a lot about my right to work. I not only want to work, but I want a career that pays well, offers training, and promotions. I want to be self-sufficient and not rely on benefits. Every day my family is afraid to check the mailbox, waiting for a letter to see if benefits are cut off because I worked too much. I want to work, and I don’t want to be afraid of losing my benefits, I want a career that allows me the right to be independent.

This will be my focus going into next year. I will use the relationships I have made with my legislators to continue to advocate, encourage others to use their voice loudly, and continue to dedicate my life to helping the next generation of those with intellectual disabilities.

— Jena Crafton, Council Chair



Jena Crafton, Council Chair

Letter from Patrick Reinhart, Executive Director

2024 was a busy and productive year for the Council. Governor Dunleavy appointed several new members to the board, including Garrett Dominick, Lisa McDonald, and Kayla McDonogh. We also lost several retiring or non-returning members, like former Chair Heidi Lieb-Williams, Vocational Rehabilitation Director Duane Mayes, Center for Human Development Representative Ken Hamrick, and Chelsea Burke (parent advocate). Our sincerest thanks for their personal and professional contributions to the Council’s mission over the years they served on the board.

Fortunately for us, Chelsea resigned only because she accepted the position as our new Health and Social Services Planner III. Chelsea, who is also a parent of a child with autism, supervises our program staff and will lead our effort to develop a brand-new Five-Year Council Plan. You can expect to hear more about that as the New Year begins and we start scheduling staff and council members to host community forums/listening sessions around the state with families and self-advocates.

I am always so humbled to work with such a large and dedicated group of council members and GCDSE staff. It never ceases to amaze me on how committed and passionate they can be about disability issues; like seeing Jena Crafton, our Chair, and Sabrina Richmond (Vice-Chair) talk about their dreams and hopes for Alaska at the Whitehouse with Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg this past summer, or meeting with our Congressional delegation staffers to do the same. Plus, all the other self-advocates, parents, and disability rights groups like the Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC) and Key Coalition telling their stories to Alaska Legislators, or with the Lt. Governor and Commissioners at the Governor’s Home (People’s House) in Juneau. We made real progress on home and environmental modifications, youth employment, Infant Learning Program funding needs, self-direction, transportation, and workforce shortages.

Yet, despite the progress we made in 2024, we have a lot more to do this coming year in supporting our Council’s mission: Creating change that improves the lives of Alaskans with disabilities. Thank you to our members, staff and partners who supports this mission.

— Patrick Reinhart, Executive Director



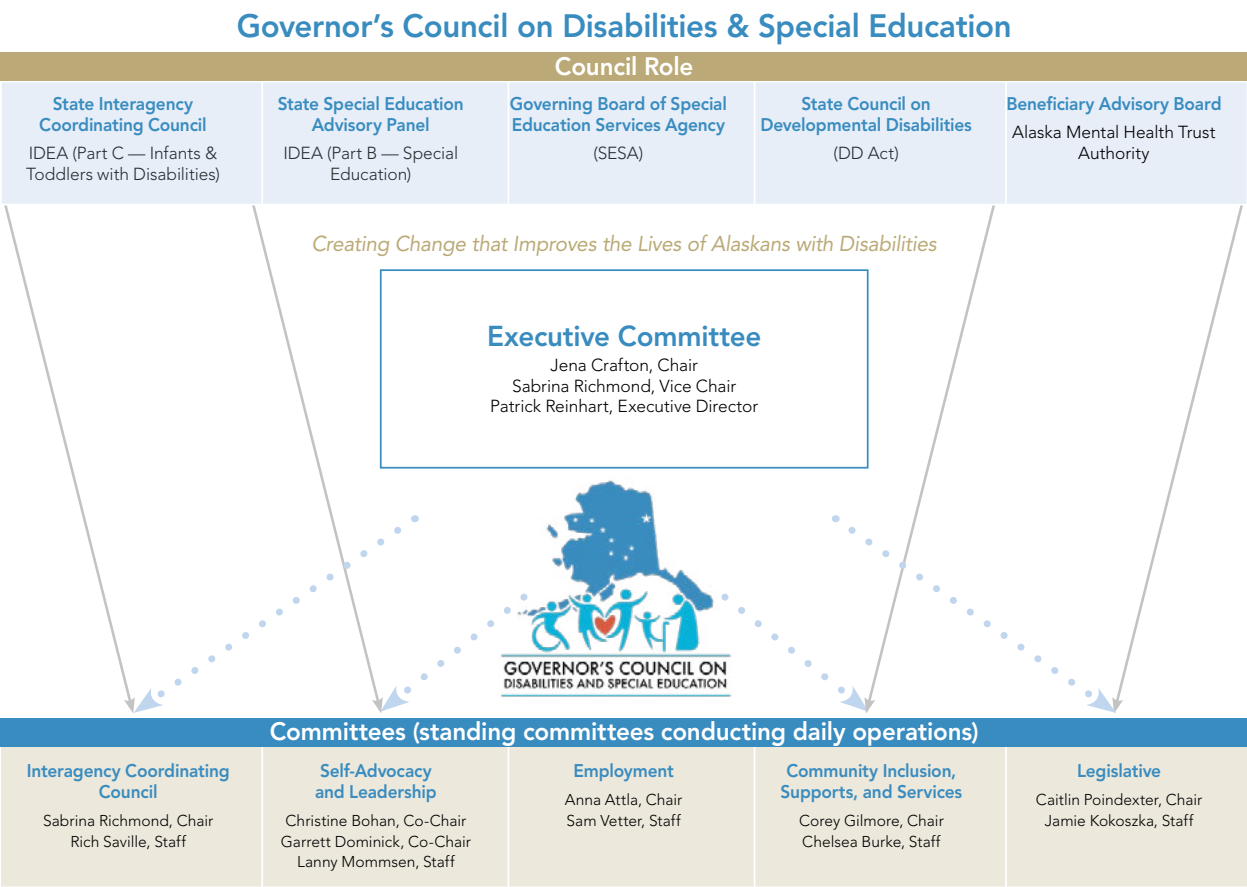
Patrick Reinhart, Executive Director

About the Council

The Governor’s Council on Disabilities and Special Education (GCDSE) is a dynamic council of self-advocates, parents, professionals, and partners working together to advance the inclusion and independence of Alaskans with disabilities.



GCDSE and Statewide Independent Living Council Members outside of the Alaska Capital building in February 2024



Amplifying Advocate Stories

In 2024, self-advocates played a central role in shaping policies, sharing their stories, and inspiring change:

“Nothing about us without us!”
Not just words but action!

Juneau Advocacy Outreach

- 14 Council members, along with partners from the Statewide Independent Living Council, met with 55 legislators over three days, presenting their priorities and advocating for the disability community.
- During the visit, Council Members attended a social function at the Governor's House to present their stories and legislative priorities to the Lieutenant Governor and other state leaders.



Council members visiting Alaska capitol and Governor’s Mansion in February 2024

Advocacy Milestones

- Recognized Anchorage’s Project SEARCH site with the **Spirit of Tomorrow Superintendent Award**.
- Council member Heidi received the prestigious **Elizabeth Petrovich Award** for her advocacy contributions.
- 100% and 70-90% Employment Outcome Awards for the Project SEARCH Alaska Sites of Anchorage, Mat-Su, and Fairbanks for 22-23 cohort year (July 2024)
- State’s Medicaid funded Environmental Modifications service increase from \$18,500 to a soft cap of \$40,000 to keep Alaskans safe in their own home



2025 Project Search Spirit of Tomorrow Awards.
Council Member Heidi Lieb-Williams holding the Elizabeth Petrovich Award (Bottom Right)

Goal Overview

Community Inclusion, Supports, & Services

Individuals with developmental disabilities will have expanded access to a flexible system of meaningful support and services in their homes and communities, aiming to increase the number of people with developmental disabilities living the lives they choose.

Self-Advocacy & Leadership

Individuals with developmental disabilities will have increased access to education, tools, and opportunities for self-advocacy. Individuals with developmental disabilities will experience enhanced access to education, tools, and opportunities for self-advocacy throughout their lives, with the goal of increasing the number of people expressing their vision for their lives in local, state, and national forums.

Employment

Individuals with developmental disabilities will have expanded access to education, tools, and opportunities for self-advocacy, enabling them to express their vision locally, statewide, and nationally.



Developmental Disabilities Shared Vision

“Alaskans share a vision of a flexible 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. Our vision includes supported families, professional staff and services available throughout the state now and into the future.”

Goal 1: Community Inclusion, Supports & Services (CISS)

Expanding access to meaningful support systems so individuals with disabilities can live their chosen lives.

Legislative Advocacy

- Presented six position papers to state legislators during annual fly-in.
- Legislative victory **H.B. 219** Repeal Assistive Technology Loan Program redistributed funding to ATLA to get assistive technology in the hands of Alaskans that need it.
- Increased the environmental modification funding cap to \$40,000, enabling more Alaskans to remain in their homes and communities.

Federal Representation

- Council members conducted two national advocacy trips to Washington DC, including the Disability Policy Seminar in April and the NACDD Conference in July to meet with congressional delegation and discuss issues that are relevant to Alaskans with disabilities.

By the Numbers

- 4 bills tracked during the legislative session.
- 55 legislative visits made by Council members.
- 300+ attendees reached through Disability Pride events.
- 3 new council members oriented into the council.
- 79 DSPs engaged in professional development through NADSP training.



Council members visit the nation’s capitol



Council members with Rep Peltola

Goal 2: Self-Advocacy & Leadership (SAL)

Increasing opportunities for individuals to express their vision and advocate for themselves at all levels.

Key Highlights

- Hosted the **Peer Power Summit**, attended by 85 Alaskans and 25 allies. **Topics included:** Autonomy & Ableism, Mental Health & Developmental Disabilities, Friendship and Dating, and Participant-Directed Services
- **100% satisfaction rate** reported by Peer Power Summit participants.
- Organized **three statewide Disability Pride/ADA events**, engaging hundreds of attendees.

Presented at major conferences

- **“Hopes, Dreams, and Dignity of Risk”** at the Improving Lives Conference.
- **“I Have Rights”** Panel at the Disability and Aging Summit.



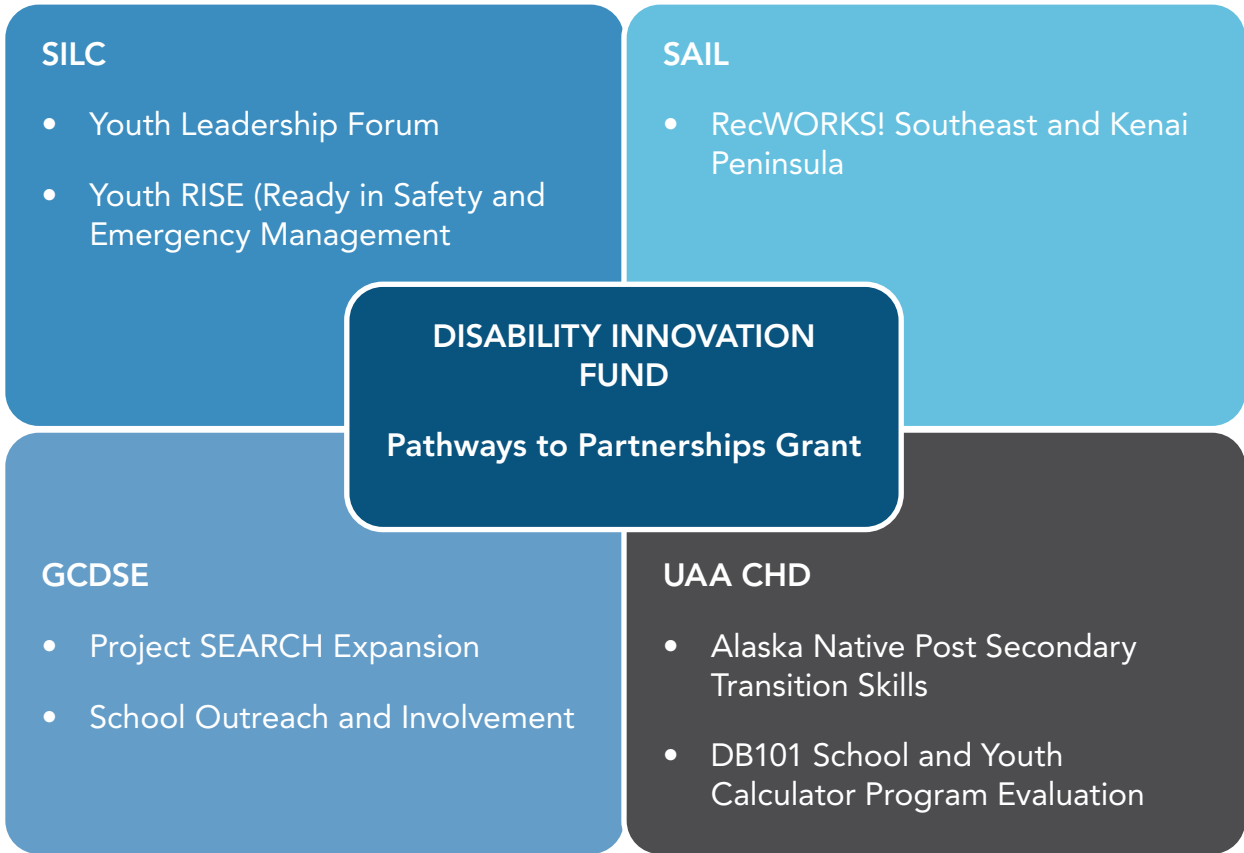
Advocacy events held in Alaska in 2024: Peer Power Summit, Disability Pride Celebrations in Anchorage and Kenai, and the Improving Lives Conference “I have Dreams” Panel

Goal 3: Employment

Supporting transitions to adulthood, integrated employment, and career development across the lifespan.

Disability Innovation Fund (DIF); Pathways to Partnerships Grant

The State Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) received a \$10 million, five-year grant starting in October 2023. This initiative involves multiple partners engaging youth with disabilities on a pathway toward employment.



Employment First Conference

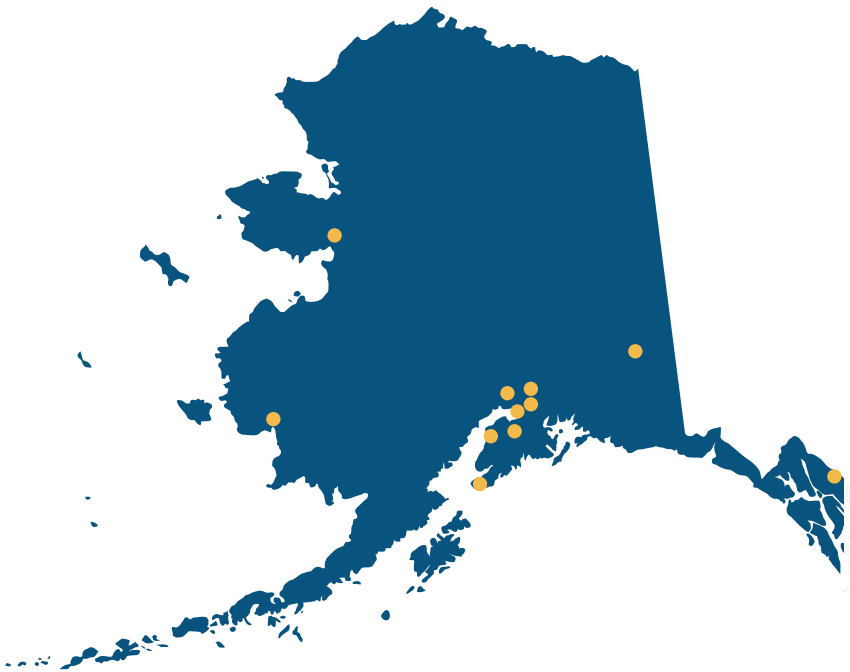
Continued coordination between the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority (Trust), Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) Council for planning and executing the Employment First Conference scheduled in November 2024, which was to focus on engagement of Alaskan employers and businesses.

By the Numbers

- **Over \$110,000** awarded through Trust Microenterprise Grants, supporting **16 self-employment opportunities**; 5 business owners were persons who experience an intellectual and/or developmental disability
- **117 attendees, 17 exhibitors, and 18 total speakers** participating for the Employment First Conference
- **Over \$26,000 in support** for Project SEARCH by Council in training, support, and equipment for 3 **Project SEARCH** sites serving **36 interns** in 2024



Employment First Conference and Project SEARCH Visit



Council Members

- Anna Attla | Anchorage
- Christine Bohan | Palmer
- CB Brady | Anchorage
- Jena Crafton (Chair) | Eagle River
- Art Delaune | Fairbanks
- Garrett Dominick | Soldotna
- Don Enoch | Juneau
- Margaret Evans | Anchorage
- Dave Fleurant | Chugiak
- Jeanne Gerhardt-Cyrus | Kiana
- Corey Gilmore | Anchorage
- Kenneth Hamrick | Anchorage
- Elizabeth Joseph | Kongiganak
- Mariah Krueger | Anchorage
- Heidi Lieb-Williams | Anchorage
- Tony Newman | Juneau
- Caitlin Poindexter | Anchorage
- Sabrina Richmond (Vice Chair) | Juneau
- Nona Safra | Homer
- Demii Van Dusen | Tok
- Shelly Vendetti-Vuckovich | Anchorage
- Marlene Wenger | Copper Center
- Rep. Stanley Wright | Anchorage



Group Photo 2024 Fall Council Meeting



2024 GCDSE Staff

Council Staff

- Patrick Reinhart, Executive Director
- Chelsea Burke, HSS Planner III
- Lanny Mommsen, Research Analyst III
- Rich Saville, Program Coordinator II
- Jamie Kokoszka, Program Coordinator II
- Samantha Vetter, Program Coordinator I
- Michael Stevenson, BSPM I
- Ian Miner, Administrative Assistant II



State of Alaska
Governor Mike Dunleavy

Department of Health
Heidi Hedberg, Commissioner

Governor's Council on Disabilities & Special Education

Patrick Reinhart, Executive Director

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