

Opening Statement of Senator Lisa Murkowski
for Indian Affairs Committee Field Hearing
on S.1905, Rural Teacher Housing Act of 2003
Anchorage, Alaska
March 16, 2004

As presiding chair of this field hearing of the U.S. Senate Indian Affairs Committee, I call this hearing to order. This hearing is on S.1905, the Rural Teacher Housing Act of 2003, which I introduced in the Senate late last year. I have invited a panel of witnesses from across our state to share their thoughts and personal experiences on this important issue with me.

As we all know, rural school districts in our state face the challenge of recruiting and retaining teachers, administrators and other school staff due to the lack of housing in rural communities. For example, one year in the Lower Kuskokwim School District, they hired one teacher for every six who decide not to accept job offers. Half of the applicants not accepting a teaching position in that district indicated that their decision was related to the lack of housing.

Last year, I traveled through rural Alaska with U.S. Education Secretary Rod Paige. I wanted him to see the challenges of educating children in rural Alaska. At the village school in Savoonga, we saw that the principal slept in a broom closet in the school due to the lack of housing in that village. The special education teacher slept in her classroom, bringing a mattress out each evening to sleep on the floor. The other teachers shared housing in a single home. Needless to say, there is not enough room for the teachers' spouses. Regrettably, Savoonga is not an isolated example of the teacher housing situation in rural Alaska.

Fortunately, however, we were able to make a tangible difference in Savoonga. As a result of the "Alaska Project," a cabinet-level task force consisting of the federal Departments of Education, Health and Human Services (HHS), and Housing and Urban Development (HUD) that is focused around interagency collaboration to address education, health, and housing challenges facing Alaska, we were able to implement a short-term teacher housing solution in Savoonga along with our other partners: the Denali Commission, the State of Alaska, Alaska Housing Finance Corporation (AHFC), HUD, HHS, the Bering Strait School District, the City

of Savoonga, the Savoonga IRA Council, and the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium.

Working with all of these stakeholders, we have secured an agreement that will allow the Bering Strait School District to use the former Savoonga clinic building to house teachers for a period of two years, starting on November 1. Using Denali Commission funds, this facility was renovated to house several Savoonga teachers. Teachers that were previously living in the Savoonga school are now living in the renovated clinic.

In addition to this, I have secured up to \$10 million in the Denali Commission's fiscal year 2004 budget for teacher housing projects in our rural communities. I am hopeful that a portion of that funding or any other available housing funding will also go to Savoonga to address the long term challenge of teacher housing there.

Fortunately, we have been able to help out teachers in Savoonga with their housing problem. This is only an example of what we can do to assist rural school districts in our state with this problem. This legislation does address the statewide problem. If we do not assist these districts with this problem, these districts will continue to experience high teacher turnover.

More specifically, turnover is as high as 30 percent each year in some rural areas with housing issues being a major factor. How can we expect our children to receive a quality education when the good teachers don't stay? How can we meet the mandates of No Child Left Behind in such an educational environment? Clearly, the lack of teacher housing in rural Alaska is an issue that must be addressed in order to ensure that children in rural Alaska receive the same level of education as their peers in more urban settings.

My bill authorizes the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development to provide teacher housing funds to the Alaska Housing Finance Corporation. In turn, the corporation is authorized to provide grant and loan funds to rural school districts in Alaska for teacher housing projects.

This legislation will allow school districts in rural Alaska to address the housing shortage in the following ways: construct housing units; purchase housing units; lease housing units; rehabilitate housing units; purchase or

lease property on which housing units will be constructed, purchased or rehabilitated; repay loans secured for teacher housing projects; provide funding to fill any gaps not previously funded by loans or other forms of financing; and conduct any other activities normally related to the construction, purchase, or rehabilitation of teacher housing projects. These activities include tasks such as, connecting housing units to various utilities, the preparation of construction sites, and transporting all equipment and materials necessary for the project to and from the construction or renovation site. Of course, this last item is critical to make any construction or renovation project work in rural Alaska.

Eligible school districts that accept funds under this legislation will be required to provide the housing to teachers, administrators, other school staff, and members of their households.

In closing, it is imperative that we address this important issue immediately and allow the flexibility for the disbursement of funds to be handled at the state level. The quality of education of our rural students is at stake.

Now, I would be pleased to hear from the witnesses that have joined us today.