Understanding the Role of Risk Assessments in the Criminal Justice System

- Risk assessments use objective and standardized information about an individual to determine the probability of an undesired behavior (e.g. committing a new crime).

- Throughout time, risk assessments have become data-driven, meaning they are built using statistical analysis to predict potential behavior. Many professions use risk assessment, and the tools should continuously be validated and improved.

- Even though statistics are used, a risk assessment cannot predict the future for 100% of individuals, 100% of the time. Assessments are not a crystal ball - but decades of evidence have found that they are more accurate than professional judgement alone.

- Risk assessments have been used by correctional agencies for more than forty years. They are used at multiple points in the criminal justice process – pretrial, sentencing, institutional corrections, and probation and parole – in nearly every state in the country.

- The Alaska Department of Corrections has used an actuarial risk assessment (the LSI-R) to inform institutional correctional placements and levels of probation and parole supervision for over a decade. Risk assessment is not new to Corrections and it is not new to Alaska.

- Risk assessments are also used in many other fields, including medicine and finance. For example, car insurance companies use actuarial risk assessments to determine the likelihood of an individual being involved in a car accident. There is overwhelming evidence that actuarial risk assessments are helpful in improving outcomes and targeting services.

- Across the country, we are still learning and developing best practices at the pretrial stage. Although data-driven risk assessments have been used at the pretrial stage for over 15 years, they have only begun to be used more widely in the past seven years. Similarly, while the use of risk assessment in pretrial services agencies is growing, they are newer and less widespread than probation and parole, for example.

- Although the breadth of pretrial assessment is newer, more information emerges every day. Without assessment, it is very difficult to learn more about the pretrial population and the best strategies to intervene and reduce future criminal involvement.

- There is a surge in pretrial litigation across the country. Several states have seen these legal challenges result in court ordered changes to the way jurisdictions use monetary bail. Some jurisdictions have been forced to make sweeping changes in their pretrial processes without any alternatives in place, such as Pretrial Enforcement Officers that now exist in Alaska to focus on public safety. Many states are making major reforms to their pretrial system as a result of pretrial litigation. These changes often require use of assessment tools, which Alaska also now has in place.