

February 6, 2018

Representative Matt Claman and Representative Chuck Kopp  
State Capitol Room 118  
Juneau, AK 99801

Dear Representatives Claman and Kopp:

We are writing to thank you for sponsoring HB 312, "an act relating to arrest without a warrant for assault in the fourth degree at a health care facility; and relating to an aggravating factor at sentencing for a felony offense against a medical professional at a health care facility."

Alaska hospitals have reported an increase in workplace violence over the past year, including assaults with physical injury against caregivers. Staff report feeling unsafe in the workplace. They experience being kicked, punched, spit on or verbally threatened all too often. This should not be an acceptable workplace hazard. Unfortunately, for many nurses, physicians, and other caregivers, this has become the new normal.

Along with other Alaska hospitals, SEARHC has experienced this same increase in incidents between healthcare workers and disgruntled patients. Employees in high risk areas, such as Registration, Travel, Emergency Department and Pharmacy, repeatedly report aggressive confrontations and direct threats to their safety. Employees have received threats of gun attacks, physical violence and have witnessed as patients destroyed treatment rooms while in a violent state of mind. SEARHC has been fortunate to have experienced only a handful of assaults and very few injuries; however the impact on overall employee morale is detrimental to our mission as a healthcare organization.

Many assaults fall into the category of fourth degree assault in which an officer must have a warrant to arrest an individual. We have learned that this process may be part of the reason that police often cite and leave an individual on scene rather than arresting them. We support making it easier for law enforcement to remove perpetrators of assault by eliminating the need for a warrant when an assault has occurred at our health care facility.

We also support allowing sentences to be imposed above the presumptive range for felony offenses against a medical professional at a health care facility. This sends a clear message to our health care providers that they are supported and valued.

We recognize legislation is only one potential solution to the complex problem. To successfully address this issue, each facility needs to implement a comprehensive strategy using evidence-based practices. At the Southeast Regional Healthcare Consortium we have implemented the following strategies to help keep our employees safe.

In 2016, SEARHC leadership initiated a comprehensive security assessment with the goal of evaluating our organization's approach to workplace security and to identify areas to focus improvement activities. The

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assessment focused on the following four main areas of security management; effective security technologies, professional development of security staff, security training programs, and policies.

As a result of the assessment, SEARHC has invested significant resources into improving our physical security by installing electronic access control systems and video monitoring, as well as considering security improvements during design/construction projects. In addition to physical security improvements, SEARHC has also invested resources into training our healthcare workers and support staff in de-escalation techniques. These skills provide our staff with a base understanding of how to react to aggressive patient behavior and reduce the risk of injury to themselves and others.

While all SEARHC employees are encouraged to be aware of their physical security and participate in de-escalation training, we have also established a security team at our two largest facilities, Mt Edgumbe Hospital in Sitka and the Juneau based Ethel Lund Medical Center. As part of our professional development for our security leadership and officers, SEARHC is a member of the International Association of Healthcare Security and Safety (IAHSS). All officers are expected to complete the Certified Healthcare Security Officer training and progress through additional certifications as they advance in their career with SEARHC.

The work SEARHC has completed over the last few years has provided a safer working environment for our staff and we are committed to continued improvements. Additional support in the form of this bill will aid in our efforts.

Please let us know if there is anything we can do to support this moving forward. Thank you very much for your advocacy on this important issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Dan Neumeister", with a large, stylized flourish at the end.

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