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February 25, 2022

Dear Representatives Adam Wool; Steve Thompson; Andy Josephson; Ivy Spohnholz; and Sara Hannan:

The Alaska Behavioral Health Association (ABHA) is committed to advancing access to quality, cost-effective mental health and substances abuse treatment services to all people in need across the state, whether in remote, rural, or urban areas. We are a nonprofit membership organization of over seventy behavioral health treatment providers statewide that deliver behavioral healthcare to Alaskans.

**ABHA supports House Bill 203** because we have seen, firsthand, the devastation suicide and gun violence has had on families, our communities, and the state. We know common sense prevention can save lives and avoid this heartache and we recognize that leadership on this issue is critical right now for Alaska.

**The data and statistics on this issue are clear and lead to the undeniable conclusion that safe storage of firearms can help reduce suicide and gun violence.**

➤ Alaska's Youth – Since 2007, there have been significant increase in students feeling sad or hopeless for two weeks or longer, and seriously considering, planning, and attempting suicide.<sup>1</sup>

According to this most recent data:

- More than 1 out of 3 (38.1%) students felt sad or hopeless for two weeks or longer;
- 1 out of 4 (25.3%) seriously considered suicide;
- 1 out of 5 (21.6%) made a suicide plan; and
- Approximately 1 out of 5 (19.7%) attempted suicide.

➤ Alaska's Adults –

According to the most recent data:

- An average of 6.6% of Alaskan adults 18 or older (34,000) had serious thoughts of suicide in the past year. This is higher than the national average of 4.5%.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Alaska Department of Health and Social Services/Division of Public Health. *2019 Alaska Youth Risk Behavior Survey Highlights*. May 2020. [https://dhss.alaska.gov/dph/Chronic/Documents/yrbs/2019YRBS\\_Highlights.pdf](https://dhss.alaska.gov/dph/Chronic/Documents/yrbs/2019YRBS_Highlights.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). *Behavioral Health Barometer: Alaska, Volume 6: Indicators as measured through the 2019 National Survey on Drug Use and Health and the National Survey of Substance Abuse Treatment Services*. HHS Publication No. SMA-20-Baro-19-AK. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2020. Pg. 37. [https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/reports/rpt32818/Alaska-BH-Barometer\\_Volume6.pdf](https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/reports/rpt32818/Alaska-BH-Barometer_Volume6.pdf)

➤ Easy access to firearms results in higher suicide rates in those suffering from suicidal thoughts.<sup>3</sup>

This is primarily the result of two factors:

- most suicidal acts are committed impulsively after the decision is made, and
- firearms are a particularly lethal method of suicide.

Research shows that storing firearms securely helps prevent suicide by delaying the impulsivity of the act, providing critical time for the person to reconsider their actions and for potential life-saving intervention. Research also shows that unsafe gun storage provides easy access to a particularly lethal method of suicide, and that eliminating that method will reduce suicides rather than simply increasing suicide by other means.

➤ Gun-related deaths are, in fact, the leading cause of death for both suicide and homicide in Alaska.<sup>4</sup>

According to this most recent data:

- 49% of death from homicides in 2020 in Alaska were the result of firearm discharge;
- 65% of death from suicide in 2020 in Alaska were the result of firearm discharge.

➤ Safe storage is the accepted norm.

According to the most recent data:

- Only 24% of gun owners in the U.S. unsafely stored all of their guns in an unlocked location in their homes. At the other end of the spectrum, nearly half (46%) of U.S. gun owners recently reported safely storing all of their guns.<sup>5</sup>
- Here in Alaska, a 2004 survey found that guns are present in at least 60% of the households but only 11% reported that the guns were unlocked and loaded.<sup>6</sup>
- National studies consistently suggest safer firearm storage is practiced in gun-owning households with children, especially younger children. Unsafe storage practices seem to be on the rise however with a recent national survey estimating that 1 in 5 gun-owning households with children in the home store at least one gun loaded and unlocked.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> American Psychological Association (APA). *Firearm Safe Storage Practices: Implementing Evidence-based methods for Suicide Reduction*. May 2021. <https://www.apa.org/advocacy/gun-violence/firearm-safe-storage-practices.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, Division of Public Health. Health Analytics and Vital Records Section. *Alaska Vital Statistics 2020 Annual Report. Table 24: Accidents (Unintentional Injuries) and Violent Death Mortality by Cause (2016-2020)*. Pg. 37. [https://dhss.alaska.gov/dph/VitalStats/Documents/PDFs/VitalStatistics\\_AnnualReport\\_2020.pdf](https://dhss.alaska.gov/dph/VitalStats/Documents/PDFs/VitalStatistics_AnnualReport_2020.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Crifasi, C.; Doucette, M.; McGinty, E.; Webster, D.; Barry, C. *Storage Practices of U.S. Gun Owners in 2016*. American Journal of Public Health 108, no. 4 (April 1, 2018): pp. 532-537. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2017.304262>

<sup>6</sup> Alaska Department of Health & Social Services, Division of Public Health. Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey (BRFSS) 2004-05 Annual Report. Pg. 51. <https://dhss.alaska.gov/dph/Chronic/Documents/brfss/pubs/BRFSS0405.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Azrael, D.; Cohen, J.; Salhi, C.; Miller, M. *Firearm Storage in Gun-Owning Households with Children: Results of a 2015 National Survey*. J Urban Health. 2018 Jun; 95(3): 295–304. Published online 2018 May 10. doi: [10.1007/s11524-018-0261-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11524-018-0261-7)

- Safe storage laws have been shown to reduce youth suicide and gun deaths generally.
  - Examining suicide data and state safe storage laws from 1976-2001, researchers concluded that there was an 8.3% reduction in suicide rates for individuals 14-17 years old in states that had adopted child access prevention (CAP) safe storage laws.<sup>8</sup>
  - The research estimates that these safe storage laws could be responsible for preventing 333 youth aged 14-17 from committing suicide during the study period (from when Florida instituted the first CAP law in 1989 to when the 18<sup>th</sup> CAP law was put in place in 2001). In 2002 alone, researchers estimate that the safe storage laws could be responsible for preventing 35 suicides in the age group in the 18 states that had CAP laws in place.<sup>9</sup>
  - After an extensive research review, the RAND Corporation determined, with 97% certainty, that Child Access Prevention laws requiring safe firearm storage offered prevention benefits beyond the target age group and were associated with an overall decline in firearm deaths. Estimates of the magnitude of that association indicate a 6% decline in overall firearm deaths.<sup>10</sup>
    - RAND concluded CAP laws protect children and issued a recommendation that the 22 states (including Alaska) that have not yet passed safe storage laws, do so.<sup>11</sup>

#### **Alaska's healthcare professionals have recognized the need for leadership and action.**

- ✓ Alaska's Comprehensive Integrated Mental Health Plan (2020-2024) includes a goal that individuals, families, communities, and governments take ownership to prevent suicides and self-harm in Alaska.<sup>12</sup>
- ✓ The State of Alaska's Suicide Prevention Plan (2018-2022) includes a strategy that communities partner with diverse organizations to raise awareness about limiting access to lethal means of suicide. The strategy's success rests on "looking widely for partners to help raise awareness and promote safety."<sup>13</sup>
- ✓ The Alaska Public Health Association, citing gun violence as a public health crisis in Alaska, passed a resolution in support of legislation requiring gun owners in Alaska to securely store their firearms.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Webster, D.; Vernick, J.; Zeoli, A; et al. *Association Between Youth-Focused Firearm Laws and Youth Suicides*. JAMA. 2004;292(5):594-601. doi:10.1001/jama.292.5.594. <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/199194>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Schell, T.; Cefalu, M.; Griffin, B.; Smart, R; and Morral, A. *Changes in firearm mortality following the implementation of state laws regulating firearm access and use*. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America (PNAS). June 30, 2020 117 (26) 14906-14910; first published June 15, 2020; <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1921965117>

<sup>11</sup> Moyer, M. *Child Access Laws Are Increasingly Proven to Protect Kids from Guns*. Apr. 22, 2020. <https://www.thetrace.org/2020/04/child-access-laws-evidence-rand-gun-policy-study/>

<sup>12</sup> Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority. *Strengthening the System: Alaska's Comprehensive Integrated Mental Health Program Plan (2020-2024)*. July 2019. Pg. 25.

[https://dhss.alaska.gov/Commissioner/Documents/MentalHealth/StrengtheningSystem-CompPlan\\_2020-24.pdf](https://dhss.alaska.gov/Commissioner/Documents/MentalHealth/StrengtheningSystem-CompPlan_2020-24.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Alaska Statewide Suicide Prevention Council. *State of Alaska Suicide Prevention Plan (2018-2022): Recasting the Net, Promoting Wellness to Prevent Suicide in Alaska*. Jan. 2018. Goal 3. Strategy 3.1. Pg. 28.

<https://dhss.alaska.gov/SuicidePrevention/Documents/Reports/2018-2022-RCTN-Implementation-Report.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Alaska Public Health Association. *ALPHA Resolution 2022-01: Support for Requiring Secure Storage of Firearms in Alaska*. <https://www.alaskapublichealth.org/docs/2022-01-requiring-secure-storage-of-firearms-in-alaska/>

**The safe storage requirement proposed in HB203 will help promote behavior change and the resulting outcomes we hope to achieve**

The Alaska Behavioral Health Association (ABHA) has some reservations about trying to achieve the goal of this bill, reducing suicide and other gun violence by safe secure gun storage, by mandate and through punitive measures alone.

While research does suggest that safe gun storage is the norm among gun owners, we do not believe simply forcing the practice of the majority on the minority is the best way to achieve the goal of the legislation. Behavioral change is best achieved when it is introduced by a trusted source and the change is supported.

*Trusted Source*

Survey data suggests firearm storage decisions are influenced by information provided by gun safety courses and discussions with family members. Survey responses from gun owners ranked law enforcement, hunting and outdoor groups, active-duty military, and the National Rifle Association as the most effective messengers of safe storage practices. The survey found that physicians and celebrities were least effective in communicating about safe storage practices, especially if these individuals were perceived as lacking authority, experience, or understanding of guns or gun ownership. Based on these responses, researchers suggested health officials focus their communication on the health risks of unsafe storage and public health advocates consider partnering with groups that carry greater influence on the topic of safe firearm storage.<sup>15</sup>

*Supporting the Change We Hope to Achieve*

In a study conducted by researchers from the Indian Health Services, the University of Washington, and Bristol Bay Area Health Corporation (BBAHC) published in the journal *Injury Prevention*, two Alaskan communities were selected for a program that studied behavior change regarding safe gun storage. Forty randomly selected households with two or more firearms were provided gun safes and trigger locks. At the beginning of the study, 15% of the guns found in the 40 households were locked. Three months after the gun lockers had been installed and gun locks had been distributed, 78% of households reporting (37 of the original 40) said that all guns were secured.<sup>16</sup>

A separate study again involving Bristol Bay Area Health Corporation (BBAHC), with additional collaboration from the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (ANTHC) and Yukon Kuskokwim Health Corporation (YKHC), tested the extent to which positive behavioral change happened when it was supported. Despite having firearms in the home, a small portion of the 255 households participating in the study had a gun safe or locking cabinet at the beginning of the study (less than 5%). Researchers and partners installed \$80 gun cabinets in the homes and provided education and informational materials to homeowners. 18-months later, researchers found 65% of households reporting all firearms safely stored.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Crifasi, C.; Doucette, M.; McGinty, E.; Webster, D.; Barry, C. *Storage Practices of U.S. Gun Owners in 2016*. American Journal of Public Health 108, no. 4 (April 1, 2018): pp. 532-537. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2017.304262>

<sup>16</sup> Horn A., Grossman, D.C., Jones, W. Berger, L.R. *Injury Prevention. Community Based program to improve firearm storage practices in rural Alaska*. 2003; Pgs. 231-234. <https://injuryprevention.bmjjournals.com/content/injuryprev/9/3/231.full.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> David C. Grossman, Helen A. Stafford, Thomas D. Koepsell, Ryan Hill, Kyla D. Retzer, and Ward Jones, 2012: *Improving Firearm Storage in Alaska Native Villages: A Randomized Trial of Household Gun Cabinets* American Journal of Public Health 102, S291–S297, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2011.300421>

The State's Suicide Prevention Plan points to similar successes by Kenaitze Indian Tribe's Yinihugheltani program. The plan also highlights that the Alaska State Troopers continue to offer free gun locks.<sup>18</sup> Alaska's Veterans Administration also offers free gun locks to community providers, military members, and Alaskan veterans.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the concern about achieving the goal through mandate alone, ABHA believes that HB203 will promote safe gun storage and achieve its goal because the new safe storage requirement in the legislation will promote education and programs that incentivize the behavior change and resulting outcomes we are all hoping for.

Given the devastating impact gun violence has in Alaska, and the most current data and research available, HB203's safe storage requirement is a sensible and practical early step to help promote safe practices and, ultimately, safeguard Alaskans.

Sincerely,



Tom Chard  
Chief Executive Officer (CEO)  
Alaska Behavioral Health Association (ABHA)

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<sup>18</sup> Alaska Statewide Suicide Prevention Council. *State of Alaska Suicide Prevention Plan (2018-2022): Recasting the Net, Promoting Wellness to Prevent Suicide in Alaska*. Jan. 2018. Goal 3. Strategy 3.1. Pg. 28.

<https://dhss.alaska.gov/SuicidePrevention/Documents/Reports/2018-2022-RCTN-Implementation-Report.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> Contact Corey Terhune, Health System Specialist, Suicide Prevention, Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention (11MHSP) at [Corey.Terhune@va.gov](mailto:Corey.Terhune@va.gov).