

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE



REPRESENTATIVE GERAN TARR

H.B. 355

“Youth Mental Health First Aid Training”

Sponsor Statement

Alaska has the highest suicide rate per capita in the country, at almost twice the national rate. There is an average of 136 suicides a year in Alaska and between 2000 and 2009, there was at least one suicide in 176 different Alaskan communities. Alaska Native men between the ages of 15-24 have the highest rate of suicide among all demographics in the United States, and the rate of suicide for all Alaska youth in this age group was nearly twice as high as the rate for adults over 25. Compounding this problem, youth exposed to suicide or suicidal behaviors are more likely to attempt suicide. Notably, 90% of suicide victims have a diagnosable, treatable mental or substance abuse disorder. We must reverse this trend.

In your life, you are more likely to see a person having a panic attack than you are to see someone having a heart attack. Though many of us know how to properly respond to a heart attack, few of us know what to do when confronted with someone having mental or emotional crises. Creating an environment where people know how to properly respond to these situations is a small step towards treating Alaska’s problems with suicide, addiction, and abuse. Mental Health First Aid courses teach people how to recognize the signs and symptoms of mental health problems and how to provide initial aid before guiding a person toward appropriate professional help.

MHFA was introduced to the United States in 2008 and since then over 50,000 state and municipal employees, clergy members, police officers, and citizens have been trained in 47 states and the District of Columbia. Participants learn how to detect a number of mental illnesses, including schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, psychosis, substance use disorders, depression, anxiety and eating disorders, and how to respond to people who have them. This ultimately saves municipalities money. People with untreated mental illnesses frequently consume fire and police department time, as well as emergency room costs. By recognizing when mental health treatment is necessary for young Alaskans, a community can begin to take care of itself.

I ask for your consideration and support for Mental Health First Aid training for our youth so that we can have a healthier future and healthier Alaskans.