



THE STATE
of **ALASKA**
GOVERNOR BILL WALKER

Department of
Health and Social Services

Senior and Disabilities Services
Governor's Council on Disabilities & Special
Education

Patrick J. Reinhart, Executive Director

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March 28, 2018
RE: SB169 Letter of Support
To Senator Giessel:

The Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education (the "Council") fills a variety of federal and state roles, including serving as the State Council on Developmental Disabilities (SCDD) under the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act. As the state DD Council, the Council works with Senior and Disabilities Services (SDS) and other state agencies to ensure that people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families receive the services and supports that they need, as well as participate in the planning and design of those services. One of the duties of the state DD Council is providing comments on bills that may have an impact on individuals with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities and their families.

In some parts of our state, communities have been enduring a lack of mental health services for several years or more. In those areas, mental and behavioral health providers are overwhelmed and unable to provide services for those who have little money and/or no health insurance coverage. Medicaid providers limit their clientele to the most severe cases or those leaving the correctional system. Most private mental health providers will not accept Medicaid, making severely limiting access to mental or behavioral health services to vulnerable populations.

Alaska has mental health care professionals who can provide needed services to Alaskans. However, the system has built-in constraints on where and how providers can offer mental health services, limiting access to many. One barrier to care is an existing regulation mandating that mental health professionals in a behavioral health clinic must have a supervising psychiatrist physically present in their clinic 30% of the time. There have been reports that some clinics have up to a 2-year waiting list. Many of these individuals waiting for care are unable to work or function in their community. Many are homebound because they cannot cope with their mental health issues without receiving services. That is completely unacceptable; while patients wait, their conditions worsen and often lead to other negative behaviors such as assault, robbery, severe depression and even death.

Federal Medicaid law mandates supervision of mental health therapists by a psychiatrist. Senate Bill 169 would allow a physician to supervise providers in a clinic by consultation or communication device. This allows the use of modern technology to accomplish the same supervisory oversight that includes clinical consultation, approving behavioral health treatment plans, reviewing each case, ensuring services are medically necessary, and assuming professional responsibility for the services provided.

With health care services expanding in Alaska via the use of telemedicine, particularly in rural areas, the removal of this barrier opens doors to expand needed behavioral health care treatments to many more Alaskans. The Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education advocates and supports people experiencing disabilities. A large majority of this vulnerable population experiences mental health issues and would be better able to live more independently if they had more access to affordable mental health services. These services are absolutely needed now because lives are at stake, and those contemplating suicide or harmful behaviors cannot continue to linger on waitlists.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Maggie Winston".

Maggie Winston, Chair

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Art Delaune".

Art Delaune, Legislative Chair