



March 4, 2018

Senator David Wilson
Chair, Senate Health and Social Services
Alaska State Legislature
120 4th Street
Juneau, AK. 99801

Dear Senator Wilson,

The Mat-Su Health Foundation strongly supports Senate Bill 169, “Medicaid, Behavioral Health Coverage,” and we appreciate that it is being heard in the Senate Health and Social Services Committee.

The prevalence of mental health and substance abuse issues is increasing in the Mat-Su and statewide. There are severe gaps in the continuum of care for behavioral health, and these gaps cause minor problems to go untreated, often resulting in escalation that erupts in devastating and costly full-blown crisis. Sadly, Alaska’s main paths to behavioral health care are emergency rooms and jail. We all know this isn’t where we should be investing our state’s dollars, but that is exactly what we are doing today.

In 2016 alone, 3,443 patients with behavioral health diagnoses went to the Mat-Su Regional Medical Center Emergency Department. Their charges totaled \$43.8 million, and that’s not counting additional costs for law enforcement, 911 dispatch, and transportation, which were estimated at \$1.6 million for 2013 and are significantly higher today. The average annual growth rate for visits for patients with a behavioral health diagnosis to the Mat-Su Regional Emergency Department grew 20 percent from 2015 to 2017. Additionally, from 2014 to 2017, the number of behavioral health assessments required for patients in crisis in the emergency department grew from 349 to more than 1,000 – all in a hospital that does not currently provide behavioral health care.

In the Mat-Su Health Foundation’s 2013 Mat-Su Community Health Needs Assessment, the people of Mat-Su told us that the top five health issues they were concerned about were all related to mental health and substance abuse. Mat-Su citizens want an improved and coordinated system of care that makes treatment for behavioral health more readily accessible. Thousands of Alaskans of all ages – children, families, and older Alaskans - are struggling with mental health concerns. They came from all walks of life, and they live all across our great state. One thing they have in common is that they have problems that they simply cannot tackle on their own. Another thing they have in common is that there is not enough access to behavioral health care. This legislation helps address these issues. It will improve access, reduce cost, and – most importantly – help people to get the care they need.

Sincerely,

Chief Executive Officer

Cc: Senators Giessel, von Imhof, Micciche, Begich