



**MAT-SU HEALTH
FOUNDATION**

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March 16, 2018

Senator David Wilson
Alaska State Legislature
120 4th Street, State Capitol Room 511
Juneau, AK. 99801

Dear Senator Wilson:

Please accept this letter of support for SB 105 from the Mat-Su Health Foundation (MSHF). MSHF is the official business name of Valley Hospital Association, which shares ownership in Mat-Su Regional Medical Center (MSRMC). MSHF invests its share of the profits back into the community through grants and scholarships to improve the health and wellness of Alaskans living in Mat-Su.

As you are aware, we are experiencing a behavioral health (BH) crisis statewide, including here in Mat-Su. In terms of both volume and cost, the MSRMC Emergency Department (ED) is the number one portal for people experiencing a mental health or substance use disorder crisis in our community, even though the hospital currently offers no BH specialty care. In 2016, 3,443 patients with BH diagnoses went to the Mat-Su Regional ED. Their charges totaled \$43.8 million, and that's not counting the additional costs borne by law enforcement or Mat-Su Borough EMS for dispatch and ambulance services.

If more of our citizens could receive BH care to avert crisis, our citizens and State would be better off for it. The prevalence of mental health and substance use problems is increasing in Mat-Su and across AK. The average annual growth rate for visits to the MSRMC ED by patients with a BH diagnosis grew 20% from 2015 to 2017 due to the opioid epidemic and lack of outpatient treatment access. Additionally, from 2014 to 2017, the number of BH assessments required for patients in crisis in our ED grew from 349 to more than 1,000. By allowing Marriage and Family Therapists (MFTs) to bill Medicaid, SB105 will help more people receive care upstream in lower cost settings and prevent their issues from becoming emergent.

In the 2013 Mat-Su Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA), Mat-Su residents ranked health issues they were concerned about. The top five were all related to mental health and substance use. In a forum with all Mat-Su Borough School District (MSBSD) nurses, they demanded that we change our conversation from "access to healthcare" to "access to behavioral healthcare" and "access to physical healthcare" because they were so frustrated with lack of access to mental health care for the kids and parents they served. Both the nurses and school district administrators and principals confessed they thought they could meet the needs of the children if their parents could just access behavioral healthcare.

As a follow-up to the CHNA, MSHF conducted a Mat-Su Behavioral Health Environmental Scan, where we looked at policies that could address barriers to access care and improve the BH systems challenges we're facing. One recommendation was to expand access to BH care by making the statutory changes to allow providers like MFTs to bill Medicaid, which SB105 does.

MSHF is actively doing its part at the local level. We funded additional BH placements where the State's SHARP loan repayment program fell short on dollars and have made grants to fill gaps in the BH continuum of care. We are financing a High Utilizer Mat-Su (HUMS) project and Multi-Disciplinary Team (MDT) to case manage high need patients circulating through the MSRMC ED and through provider offices across the borough to ensure these patients are accessing care upstream and preventing costly ED visits. These projects and services keep people out of expensive emergency rooms and institutional care, and they help keep our economy strong by providing local jobs.

We also work to advocate for smart policy, like SB105, and we hope you will move this timely and important legislation forward. Many thanks for all your advocacy on behalf of the health of Alaskans.

Sincerely,

Chief Executive Officer