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March 20, 2020

Members of the House Finance Committee  
Alaska State Legislature  
Juneau, AK. 99801

Dear Representatives Foster, Johnston, Ortiz, Josephson, Knopp, LeBon, Wool, Tilton, Merrick, Sullivan-Leonard and Carpenter,

Please accept this letter of support from the Mat-Su Health Foundation for SB 134 “An act relating to medical assistance reimbursement for the services of licensed professional counselors and providing for an effective date.” Mat-Su Health Foundation (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 hospital’s profits back into the community through grants, scholarships and systems change work to improve the health and wellness of Alaskans living in Mat-Su.

Our community is currently experiencing a Behavioral Health (BH) crisis. The prevalence of mental health and substance use problems is increasing and access to care is decreasing due to a lack of providers. 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 Licensed Professional Counselors (LPCs) to bill Medicaid, SB134 will help more people receive care upstream in lower cost settings than emergency departments. If we can intervene early with a system where all people access behavioral health services in a more timely way, we will prevent pain and suffering and will save money. A BH visit for a Medicaid patient costs about \$75, while an average charge for a BH ED visit is \$4,370. Even if a person needed ten counseling session in a year the total cost would be only \$750 – a savings of \$3,600 for just one patient.

In the 2013 Mat-Su Community Health Needs Assessment, Mat-Su residents told us the top five health issues were all related to BH. Mat-Su citizens want an improved and coordinated system of care that makes treatment for BH more readily accessible. Thousands of Alaskans of all ages – children, families, and older Alaskans - are struggling with BH concerns. Yet, there are not enough providers and payor sources to meet this demand for BH care. This legislation helps address these issues.

MSHF is actively doing its part to build a complete BH continuum of care that’s fully staffed with caring professionals who provide the highest quality evidence-based services and treatment. We funded additional BH professionals 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 also 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. In its first year, the HUMS program reduced ED utilization for 34 patients by 62%, saving \$1.1 million in ED costs and, more importantly, making community health services more responsive to our residents’ needs. The savings will be even greater when systems change such as this legislation allow for increased access to care before small problems turn into a crisis.

MSHF and its Board of Directors are in strong support of SB 134 and hope to see it become law soon so that vital BH services become more available to Mat-Su residents who receive their health coverage through Medicaid.

Sincerely,

Chief Executive Officer