

ALASKA SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE  
MARCH 10, 2021  
TESTIMONY BY  
Dr. Shirley Holloway  
On SB 80

Good Morning Members of the Senate Education Committee.

My name is Shirley Holloway. I serve as Vice President for NAMI Alaska. I also have the honor of serving as President of the NAMI National Board of Directors. I have served on the State Board of Education and I am a former Alaska Commissioner of Education and Early Development.

I found NAMI after we lost our daughter who lived with mental illness to suicide.

As background, NAMI is the largest mental health organization in the nation – 600 affiliates and 48 state chapters. Our mission is to provide advocacy, education, support and public awareness so that all individuals and families affected by mental illness can build better lives.

NAMI Alaska was created in 1984 and serves the entire state, with affiliates in Anchorage, Fairbanks, Juneau and the North Slope. We offer, at no cost to participants, trained volunteer teachers and facilitators who have lived experiences. Our signature programs are evidenced based.

I would like to thank Senator Gray-Jackson for sponsoring SB 80: An Act Relating to Mental Health Education.

Education, early recognition and intervention, as well as, working on prevention are keys to minimizing mental health issues that are

common in our youth and adolescents and hopefully eradicating the long term disabilities caused by mental illness.

It is vital that Alaska 's education system create a comprehensive mental health curriculum. Proper mental health is crucial to overall well being, which is why it is necessary that mental health is incorporated into existing health education curricula, programs, and courses.

Incorporating mental health education and addressing the myths that exist about mental illness also creates a broader understanding of psychiatric diseases, which will contribute to reducing stigma for those living with mental illness.

Disseminating accurate information to schools and to the community will increase the likelihood that children and teens struggling with symptoms are not viewed negatively by their peers.

If we can do that, we increase the odds that youth will accept treatment, this leading to the improved outcomes generated by early interventions.

50% of mental illness develops by 14  
75% by 24

70-80% of children living with mental illness do not receive treatment.  
This leads to decreased performance in school

22 million adolescents aged 12-17 have experienced a major depressive episode and the estimate is 60% of them did not receive any treatment.

The dropout rate for children with severe emotional health and mental health issues is twice that of other students.

I understand that according to the Alaska 2017 Youth Risk Behavior Health Survey, one in three Alaskan students reported feeling sad or hopeless almost every day for at least two weeks in the past year and 22.8% had seriously considered suicide.

This last year with the isolation and all of the associated issues with the pandemic, we are seeing significantly more children being seen in the ER with mental health concerns. Beginning in April 2020, the proportion of children's mental health -related ER visits among all pediatric ER visits increased and remained elevated through October. Compared with 2019 the proportion of mental health-related visits for children aged 5-11 and 12-17 years increased approximately 24% to 32% respectively.

Strengthening Alaska public school's existing health curriculum to include mental health education and awareness will teach students to recognize the warning signs of mental distress and provide them with the language and resources to connect to help. This legislation expands existing health education requirements to include mental health curriculum in all K-12 health classrooms.

Thank you for the privilege to address you.

Thank you for considering the importance of this legislation. In these challenging times, it is now more important than ever to take action to address mental health and provide guidance and hope to all impacted by mental health issues.

THERE IS NO PHYSICAL HEALTH WITHOUT MENTAL HEALTH.

THE TIME IS NOW!.