



**American
Foundation
for Suicide
Prevention**

March 8, 2021

The Honorable Elvi Gray-Jackson
Alaska Senator
State Capitol Room 417
Juneau, AK 99801

RE: Support HB 80 – Student Mental Health Education

Dear Senator Elvi Gray-Jackson

The Alaska Chapter of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) supports the adoption of HB 60, which will include mental health in the overall health and personal safety curriculum for K-12 students and require that curriculum standards for mental health instruction be developed in consultation with the Department of Health and Social Services and representatives of national and state mental health organizations.

In 2019, we lost 32 young people ages 10-19 to suicide in Alaska, making it the 1st leading cause of death for that age group. According to the latest Youth Risk Behavior Survey (CDC, 2019), in the year before the survey, over 1 in 3 (38.1%) Alaska high school students reported feeling sad or hopeless almost every day for 2 or more weeks in a row; 25.4% seriously considered attempting suicide; 21.6% reported planning about how they would attempt suicide; and 19.7% attempted suicide one or more times. Youth suicide can be prevented through early detection of students who may be in crisis or struggling with their mental health and connecting those students and their families to resources and treatment services. We can and must do more to increase awareness of the mental health resources that are available for students who may be struggling.

Mental health is central to student success and well-being. Including age-appropriate mental health content in the overall school health curriculum for grades K-12 will help to reduce the stigma around mental health conditions and empower students to reach out for help should they notice signs of deteriorating mental health or suicide risk in themselves or their peers. Normalizing discussions on mental health and seeking help can increase the likelihood that students will connect with trusted adults and access available resources when needed.

With your support, we can act to affirm the state's commitment to improving the lives of Alaska's youth and prevent the tragic loss of life to suicide in the future. The AFSP Alaska Chapter appreciates your leadership and we look forward to working with you and your staff on these issues moving forward. Please feel free to reach out with any questions or if you would like additional information.

Sincerely,

Jim Biela

Board Member – Lead Field Advocate Alaska Chapter
American Foundation for Suicide Prevention
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