ANCHORAGE FIRE DEPARTMENT



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April 30, 2021

The Honorable Representative Matt Claman Chair, House Judiciary Committee State Capitol, Room 115 Juneau, AK 99801

Dear Representative Claman,

Thank you for your work on House Bill 172 Mental Health Facilities and Meds. The Anchorage Fire Department (AFD) provides all hazards prevention, emergency response, and mitigation services to the Municipality of Anchorage, responding to over 36,000 requests for emergency service in 2020. Approximately 67% of responses were emergency medical in nature, with over 1,000 patient contacts assessed as behavioral health emergencies.

The AFD recognizes many of our responses are to people in behavioral health crisis. Unfortunately, our only recourse has been to transport them to a hospital emergency department, often repeatedly. In 2018, the AFD implemented the Community Outreach, Referral, and Education (CORE) program to identify high utilizers of the 911 EMS system and work with these individuals to provide the right care at the right time. Many clients enrolled in the CORE Team include those with comorbidities of mental illness and substance use disorder.

The success of the CORE Team, as well as other Municipal programs targeted at identifying the root cause of behavioral and mental health crisis prompted our organization to propose the implementation of a mobile health crisis response team. We are fortunate that the residents of the Municipality supported our vision, providing funding through the alcohol tax for the AFD Mobile Crisis Team (MCT) to begin operations in 2021.

The AFD MCT will respond directly to the location of an individual suffering from a behavioral health emergency. Many of these responses may be managed by keeping the individual in their current location (when safe to do so), while navigating them to the appropriate resources. Individuals who cannot remain in their current location will be transported to a facility to receive stabilizing care. Currently, these facilities are hospital emergency departments.

HB 172 will support the next step in addressing the mental health crisis in our community. For the AFD MCT to be successful, they must have a crisis stabilization center available to transport clients who are unable to be managed and left in place. Providing a qualified crisis stabilization center in Anchorage allows for an appropriate transport destination rather than a hospital emergency department. In many cases, the emergency departments are not appropriately resourced for patients experiencing a behavioral health emergency. This generates greater lengths of time the hospital emergency departments are on diversion to ambulance transports with other types of patients until necessary staffing, resources, and beds become available.

The AFD, with the support of the community, is proactively taking steps to provide appropriate care to our neighbors. The passage of HB 172 will continue our efforts to reduce the number of people left untreated in our community due to lack of resources.

Sincerely.

Jodie Hettrick, Fire Chief Anchorage Fire Department



Affiliates in Anchorage, Fairbanks, Juneau, and North Slope Serving all of Alaska

May 12, 2021

Representative Matt Claman, Chair House Judiciary Committee Alaska State Legislature Alaska State Capitol Juneau, Alaska 99801

Re: HB 172 - "An Act relating to subacute mental health facilities."

Dear Representative Claman,

The board of NAMI Alaska supports HB 172, "An Act relating to admission to and detention at a subacute mental health facility." This legislation is part of the overall continuum of care in behavioral health crisis response services, particularly at the appropriate lower levels of care.

Currently, Alaska primarily relies upon law enforcement, EMS, and hospital emergency rooms to serve people in behavioral health crisis, and most communities do not have the appropriate facilities and services where officers can take people to receive appropriate care.

This legislation will allow Alaska to more fully implement proven crisis response improvements, including the nationally recognized *Crisis Now* model, by allowing first responders to bring an individual in crisis to a low to no barrier or "no wrong door" crisis stabilization center instead of an emergency room.

This new approach to addressing mental health crises follows the national guidelines for behavioral Health Crisis Care using best practices endorsed by SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration), US Department of Health and Human Services. These guidelines were developed on the experience of veteran crisis system leaders and administrators as well as the individuals and families who have relied on these supports on their worst days. They are science-based, real-world tested best-practice guidance to the behavioral health field.

We applaud the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority for their thorough analysis and consideration of the best framework suited for Alaska. While the first implementations will be in Anchorage, Fairbanks and the MatSu, it will be important to consider the needs and requirements of the rural communities throughout the state in the future.

We look forward to the continuing discussions about the *Crisis Now* initiative and final passage of this important legislation.

Respectfully,

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Ann Ringstad
Executive Director
NAMI Alaska

NAMI Alaska (National Alliance for Mental Illness) is the statewide umbrella organization for Alaska's four local and regional **NAMI** affiliates in Anchorage, Fairbanks, Juneau and the North Slope. We provide education, support, advocacy, and public awareness so that all individuals affected by mental illness can build better lives. As per our Public Policy Platform, NAMI Alaska supports efforts by policymakers, and behavioral health stakeholders in working toward a coordinated and integrated system of care that supports prevention, intervention and wellness for the entire family.