



April 11, 2022

Senate Health and Social Services Committee
Alaska State Capitol
Juneau, AK. 99801

Dear Senators Wilson, Hughes, Costello, Reinbold and Begich,

On behalf of the Mat-Su Health Foundation and its Board of Directors, I am writing to express support for SB 124, "Mental Health Facilities and Meds." The Mat-Su Health Foundation shares ownership in Mat-Su Regional Medical Center and invests its profits from that partnership back into the community to improve the health and wellness of Alaskans living in the Mat-Su.

Over the last several years the Mat-Su Health Foundation (MSHF) published three reports examining the care that Borough residents receive when they are experiencing a behavioral health crisis. The reports were the result of an ongoing research project called a Behavioral Health Environmental Scan (BHES). It was conducted in response to the foundation's 2013 Community Health Needs Assessment that ranked mental and emotional health and substance abuse as the Borough's highest-priority health concerns.

The first report in the BHES report focused on the Mat-Su's crisis response system, which includes ambulances, law enforcement, and hospital emergency rooms. The report demonstrated that the current system of care is not adequately meeting the needs of local residents seeking behavioral health treatment. Many people do not receive behavioral health care until they have reached the point of crisis. Care provided to individuals who are in crisis in an emergency department is often less effective than other types of care provided in a nonhospital setting by behavioral health professionals, yet there are gaps in the availability of these services. Based upon this data gathered for the study, thirteen recommendations were presented in the report. Many of those recommendations have already been implemented, including Medicaid Expansion to make behavioral health care available to more people, the provision of crisis intervention team training for law enforcement and emergency responders, hospital and other crisis system staff, and trauma-informed training for first responders. Transformation of the behavioral health crisis system according to the "Crisis Now" model is the next logical step, and SB 124 lays the groundwork for this.

SB 124 will give law enforcement and first responders an appropriate option for people in crisis to receive short-term mental health treatment quickly, keeping them out of jails and emergency rooms, and better serving the needs of both the person in crisis and the first responders dispatched to help them. This collaborative "no wrong door" approach will expand the number of facilities that can conduct a 72-hour evaluation, add a new, less restrictive level of care, and lead to faster, more appropriate response to crisis events.

We thank you in advance for moving this important legislation forward.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Ripley
President and CEO