

UA supports senate bill against suicide

University of Alaska has declared support for the Alaska Legislatures' new efforts to battle the state's high suicide rates among youth. Senate Bill 137, also entitled the Jason Flatt Act, would require a minimum of two hours of suicide awareness and prevention training for education personnel in grades 7-12.



UA has joined a large coalition of Alaskan organizations supporting the bill. Organizations that include the Statewide Suicide Prevention Council and the Alaska Mental Health Board, are offering not only their support, but also years of study and analysis of suicides causation and methods of prevention.

"The university is very involved in suicide prevention projects and initiatives, primarily through sponsored research at UAF and partnerships with the Statewide Suicide Prevention Council and others," stated UA Public Relations Director Kate Ripley. "It makes sense to me that our researchers and programs have been very much involved in the overall challenge of suicide prevention in Alaska."

Many such institutions have stepped forward to offer resources and experience in suicide awareness and prevention, said the Bill's Sponsor Senator Bettye Davis (D-Anch).

SB137 garners its name and drive from the Jason Foundation Incorporation (JFI). JFI was created by Clark Flatt shortly after his 16-year-old son, Jason, committed suicide in Nashville, Tennessee in 1997.

Since its inception, JFI has dedicated itself to "the prevention of the 'Silent Epidemic' of youth suicide through educational and awareness programs," according to the organization's mission statement. The agency has embarked upon a campaign to see Jason Flatt Acts passed throughout the nation.

Tennessee became the first state to pass a Jason Flatt Act in 2007. When signed into law, the Act became the most progressive suicide prevention education law in the nation, according to a statement by the Tennessee Suicide Prevention Network. Alaska would become the seventh state to enact mandated suicide training, joining Illinois, Louisiana, Mississippi, California and Arkansas.

SB137 would have no explicit financial impact on the state. JFI, as a part of their campaign, provides training resources at no cost to states that implement the act.

Senator Joe Thomas, Co-Chair of the Senate Education Committee, realizes the importance of having teachers who are able to recognize if their students are at risk for suicide.

"Teachers are often on the front lines," Sen. Thomas said in a press release, after the committee passed the bill. "If they know how to pick up on the warning signs, we can save young lives that might otherwise be tragically wasted."

Suicide has long been a sore point for Alaskans, who face higher suicide rates than any other state in the nation. According to the Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics, from 2000 to 2009, Alaska experienced a rate of 21.8 suicides per 100,000 people, as compared to the national average of 11.5 suicides per 100,000 people. Of those suicide victims, 90% had a diagnosable and treatable mental health or substance abuse disorder.

Senator Kevin Meyer, also a Co-Chair of the Senate Education Committee, pointed out during discussion of the bill that suicide ranks as the number one cause of death for Alaskans under 50 years of age.

"Our kids deserve a better chance at life, and this training is a critical step forward in that process," Sen. Meyer stated.

What role UA will play exactly is still up for determination. For now, the University system is standing behind the bill, proving its dedication with the long list of other organizations who have spent years battling the high rates in Alaska.

SB137 passed the Senate Education Committee on Jan 23. Since then, the bill has also passed the Finance Committee. As of Feb 6, the bill remains under the consideration of the Rules Committee. The committee will schedule the Senate Floor to hear the bill this Legislative Session, said hopeful members of Sen. Thomas' office.

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