

Alaska State Legislature

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Senate Bill 90 Sponsor Statement

“An Act relating to examination and treatment of minors; relating to consent for behavioral health and mental health treatment for minors 16 years of age or older; and providing for an effective date.”

The average age of onset of any mental health issue, from mood disorders to thought disorders, is age 14 years. The earlier a mental health issue is detected, the easier it is to treat. Recognition of this health need and obtaining treatment for it can be the most important thing parents will ever do for their children.¹

Suicide is the third leading cause of death among kids 10-14 nationwide, and the second leading cause in the 15-34 demographic. More than 12% of teens aged 12-17 have had at least one major depressive episode. Teen girls attempt suicide more often, but teen boys succeed more frequently with a suicide rate 4 times higher.²

Mental health issues like depression and anxiety are rising among Alaska's youth, and our suicide rates continue to remain among the highest in the nation. In 2023, 22% of high school students reported that they had considered suicide; 43% reported feeling sad or hopeless. Research shows that behavioral health services are critical to support these youth. Many teenagers are unable to access the help they desperately need due to parental consent being required for behavioral health services. Lowering the age at which minors can consent to mental and behavioral health services would allow a child in need to receive timely help before his/her situation worsens or symptoms escalate.

The parental consent requirement can be detrimental to effective treatment and often leads to long-term, negative consequences and delayed care. At age 16, teens in Alaska already have the right to drive, work, and make certain decisions about their education. Stigma surrounding mental health can prevent teens from seeking help, especially in rural areas where privacy concerns are heightened. Lowering the age of consent from the current age of 18 to 16 would encourage teens to seek care when they need it, without fear of judgement, increasing the odds of a successful early intervention.

Senate Bill 90 would allow teenagers aged 16 or older to consent to five 90-minute outpatient mental health sessions. After these initial sessions, a parent or guardian would be contacted to determine the next steps for continued treatment.

Allowing teens to make decisions about their mental health fosters a sense of responsibility and self-esteem. Empowering youth to seek help directly results in healthier individuals and communities, preventing issues like substance abuse or suicide. When teens are given control over their treatment, they are more likely to engage in therapy and follow through with necessary care. Lowering the age of behavioral health consent in Alaska from 18 to 16 is essential for addressing the growing mental health challenges among Alaska youth. By empowering teens to make decisions about their own care, we can ensure timely intervention, reduce stigma, and create healthier family connections and communities.

1. Medina, John. Brain Rules for Babies, Pear Press, 2nd edition, 2014, pg. 293.
2. Medina, John. Attack of the Teenage Brain, ASCD, 2018, pgs.147-150.