

Alaska State Senate

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SPONSOR STATEMENT

SB 103: PEER SUPPORT COUNSELING PROGRAM

SB 103 PEER SUPPORT COUNSELING PROGRAM establishes the ability for law enforcement officers and first responders to seek mental health counseling from trained peer counselors while protecting their identity. Under current law, public safety officers are extremely limited in their options to discuss stressful and traumatic events that occur in their workplace because they are often, by their nature, related to criminal investigations. SB 103 addresses the critical need to de-stigmatize mental health issues that affect many public safety officers by providing a safe and confidential way for them to talk about emotionally intense aspects of their work. The confidentiality created by the peer counseling program does not apply to any threats made by the participant, nor does it apply to admission of criminal conduct.

SB 103 allows existing agencies to establish a peer support counseling program without mandating changes to those agencies. A law enforcement agency, emergency service provider, or the Department of Corrections will have the opportunity to designate an existing employee as a peer counselor if they have prior counseling training. Any participant who seeks counseling from their designated peer is guaranteed confidentiality in those communications. Confidential space for participants to discuss emotionally traumatic events is key for creating effective Critical Incident Stress Management debriefs, which the United States Occupational Safety and Health Administration recognizes as crucial for preventing and mitigating the effects of trauma.

SB 103 will ultimately provide emotional relief and a path to healing for the Alaskans who bear the burden of protecting the public. I urge you to support SB 103.