

April 9, 2018

To: The Honorable Senator Lyman Hoffman  
Senate Finance Committee Co-Chair  
State Capitol Room 518  
Juneau AK, 99801

The Honorable Senator Anna MacKinnon  
Senate Finance Committee Co-Chair  
State Capitol Room 516  
Juneau AK, 99801

RE: Letter in support for operating budget amendments impacting mental health and substance use treatment for Alaskans

Dear Senate Finance Committee Members;

The Alaska Mental Health Board (AMHB) and the Advisory Board on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse (ABADA) share the joint mission to advocate for programs and services that serve people with behavioral health disorders, their families, care providers, and communities. Our Boards identified several budget items that serve our constituents.

We strongly support the House's recommendation to utilize designated Alaska Comprehensive Health Insurance funds over the next three years to leverage an additional \$10.5 million in federal authority through the Disproportionate Share Hospital (DSH) program. Our Boards believe there has long been a demonstrated need for additional acute behavioral health care services in Alaska. There are currently no residential facilities in Alaska for adults with acute mental health needs, leaving inpatient psychiatric emergency services, inpatient psychiatric hospitals, emergency departments, and inpatient general hospitals as the primary location for services. This funding will help hospitals offset uncompensated care costs to better respond to the increase in psychiatric emergency services for Alaskans who experience acute mental health and substance use disorder episodes.

Alaska's Psychiatric Institute (API) is currently at capacity and unable to serve the full mental health needs of Alaskans because of the limited number of beds. By allowing other hospitals and community behavioral health programs across Alaska to increase capacity through enhanced DSH funding, it will alleviate the immediate needs to provide the appropriate level of care to Alaskans experiencing a mental health crisis. Long-term solutions are already underway to increase behavioral health treatment with the additional Certificates of Need and the Department of Health & Social Services' Section 1115 Behavioral Health Demonstration Waiver application. This amendment would reduce the existing burden on medical facilities in the short-term who are

providing extremely costly beds and staff time while patients wait for the appropriate level of care to become available.

We also support the Governor's request for \$18 million state funds (GF) to expand substance abuse treatment throughout the state. As part of the Public Safety Action Plan, we see a critical need for expanding community substance use and mental health (behavioral health) services in both urban and rural areas. Services would include residential and outpatient treatment, intensive case management, medically-monitored outpatient (ambulatory) withdrawal management and Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT), sobering centers, recovery and reentry supports, housing and other assistance.

Our Boards also recognize the need for an additional \$1.456 million state funds (GF) for public guardians in the Office of Public Advocacy. This needed funding will support hiring additional guardians to serve vulnerable Alaskans found by the court to be incapacitated and in need of a protective order. Seniors and people with disabilities are often served by public guardians, who manage finances and benefits, make medical decisions, and insure suitable housing for citizens in need. Caseloads have continued to grow, approaching 100 cases per guardian, over double the recommended national maximum of 40, causing OPA to fail to meet its statutory and ethical obligations.

We understand the current fiscal climate is not conducive to additional budget requests. However, services and supports such as these help people with mental illness and substance use disorders remain safe, stable, sober and productive in the community. Thank you for your support.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Alison L. Kulas".

Alison L. Kulas, MSPH  
Executive Director