



Senator Scott Jiu Wo Kawasaki

Serving Fairbanks, Fort Wainwright & Badger Road

Sponsor Statement - SB 196 – 34-LS0926\I

“An Act establishing a behavioral health crisis services surcharge; establishing the behavioral health crisis services fund; and providing for an effective date.”

Alaska is confronting a significant behavioral health crisis, having the nation’s highest rates of youth suicide and the second highest rates of adult suicide. Additionally, while most U.S. states have seen a decline in opioid-related deaths in recent years, Alaska’s rates have nearly doubled.

Senate Bill 196 proposed the establishment of a \$0.98 monthly surcharge on each wireless and wireline telephone number and creates a dedicated Behavioral Health Crisis Services Fund. This initiative aims to enhance the state’s capacity to respond more appropriately to mental health emergencies, building upon the behavioral health crisis system of care framework established in HB 172 (2022). At \$.09 per line SB 196 is estimated to generate \$6-8 million annually in predictable, sustainable funding.

Currently, Alaska’s behavioral health crisis services rely heavily on dwindling general fund dollars, unstable or temporary grant funding, and insufficient Medicaid reimbursement rates. As Alaska has transitioned to leveraging Federal dollars through 1115 Medicaid waiver services, there has been a significant decline in funding to Behavioral Health Treatment and Recovery Grants. This financial instability has led some providers to discontinue or delay the implementation of crisis services. By establishing a consistent funding mechanism through the proposed surcharge, Alaska can ensure the sustainability and expansion of its behavioral health crisis response system.

The proposed surcharge would support critical services, including the 988 crisis hotline, mobile crisis teams, crisis stabilization centers, and culturally-appropriate outreach, programs, and services. These services are essential for providing immediate assistance to individuals experiencing mental health crises, reducing the burden on emergency departments, law enforcement agencies, and the correctional system. These funds would also facilitate the recruitment and retention of behavioral health professionals, offer specialized training, and support public awareness campaigns to destigmatize mental health issues.

Adopting the behavioral health crisis telecommunication surcharge in SB 196 is a critical step toward strengthening Alaska’s mental health infrastructure. It offers a sustainable funding solution to enhance crisis response services, ensuring that individuals in need have access to timely and effective support. By investing in this initiative, Alaska can improve public safety, reduce the strain on emergency services, and provide better outcomes for those experiencing behavioral health crises.