

# Alaska State Legislature

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## Senator Bettye Davis

**SB 137, 27-LS0994M – “An Act requiring suicide awareness and prevention training for certain school personnel.”**

### SPONSOR STATEMENT

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This bill, short titled the Jason Flatt Act, requires mandatory youth suicide awareness and prevention training approved by the Commissioner, Department of Education and Early Development to each teacher, administrator, counselor, and specialist who is employed by a school district, regional educational attendance area, or department each year for services to students in grades 7-12. Training is important because suicide is the 3<sup>rd</sup> leading cause of death for ages 10-24 and the number one cause of death for Alaskans under the age 50 years.

Awareness and education are key to prevention. Tying suicide prevention efforts into teacher training has proved very helpful in other states in reducing teen suicides. Most young people contemplating suicide show clear warning signs prior to the attempt. It is imperative that educators know how to recognize signs of at-risk youth and are prepared to intervene when they identify a problem.

Recognizing that Alaska has by far the highest rate of suicide per capita in the country, particularly among teens, young men, and Alaska Natives, the Alaska Mental Health Board and Advisory Board on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse, in partnership with the Statewide Suicide Prevention Council, the Alaska Association of Student Governments, the University of Alaska, and the Jason Foundation have established goals, training programs, and resources for teachers, coaches, and staff in suicide prevention.

The Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics 2000-2009 reported the following suicide facts and statistics:

- 21.8 suicides per 100,000 Alaskans; vs. 11.5 suicides per 100,000 nationwide
- 56.1 suicides per 100,000 Alaskan young men ages 15-24, and 141.6 Native young men and 50.3 young women in same age group.
- 1369 suicides in 176 Alaska communities between 2000 and 2009; 11 per month; 2.6 per week

- 78% of suicides were committed by men and 22% by women who made twice as many but many more failed attempts
- 90% of suicide victims experience depression or have diagnosable and treatable mental health or substance abuse disorders

The 2011 Youth Risk Behavior Survey revealed that in the last 12 months:

- 12.8% Alaska High School students reported they seriously considered suicide
- 8.7% Alaska High School Students actually attempted suicide one or more times
- 2.7% Alaska High School Students –attempted suicide resulting in injury, poisoning, or overdose treated by a doctor or nurse

Just as “it takes a village to raise a child,” it takes parents, teachers, mentors, and communities to support efforts to reduce suicides by developing environments of respect and connectedness among youth and adult role models. This will create in youth the needed hope, promise, and optimism to build healthy and appropriate relationships and behaviors. By requiring – and making resources available for – suicide prevention training for educators and school staff through this bill, the state of Alaska can ensure that youth at risk of suicide are more likely to be identified and receive help.

Alaska has many state agencies, non-profits, private citizens, health care providers, and policy makers working on this problem with programs and materials. This bill is but one part suicide prevention which has proven successful in other states. The Jason Foundation which was named after the tragic loss of the founder’s son to suicide has made available to Alaska and a limited number of other states its library of free suicide awareness and prevention training materials.

Not only will this bill and community efforts reduce suicides, particularly among vulnerable youth, but it will also reduce the number of self-inflicted injuries occasioned in over 1200 hospitalizations per year due to suicide attempts at cost of \$9,000 per case excluding physicians’ and specialists’ fees, as researched and reported by the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority in 2001-2002. The same research found 75% of the costs of Alaska suicide hospitalizations were paid through public funding sources and 15% were written off as losses by hospitals.

Suicides and attempted suicides have taken an incalculable toll on individuals and families in Alaska. The burden of this tragedy is shared by society as a whole. With all of our efforts the numbers have not decreased very much over the years. This bill, admittedly not a solution by itself, will help reduce the “silent epidemic” of youth suicide through educational and awareness programs that equip young people, educators and parents with the tools and resources to help identify and assist at-risk youth.