

February 21, 2020

Representative Matt Claman  
State Capitol Room 118  
Juneau, AK 99801

RE: House Bill 181- An Act Relating to Mental Health Education

Dear Representative Claman,

The Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority (Trust) supports HB 181 and we thank the students and professionals who are sharing their stories and advocating for positive change in Alaska's schools and communities.

The Trust has long supported advocacy and education to eliminate stigma related to mental illness and to improve lives through early intervention and prevention. Research shows that 50% of mental illness begins by age 14, and 75% begins by age 24. Alaskan students would benefit from high quality mental health education and related services in schools to help recognize early signs of mental illness and connect with supports sooner for improved health and education outcomes. This legislation is a positive first step towards a more supportive school environment for young Trust beneficiaries.

The call for mental health education for Alaskan students also highlights the need for a more comprehensive approach related to mental health supports in schools. The Trust also advocates for increased access to professional services in schools, including social workers and mental health counselors, as well as trauma-engaged consultation and professional development for staff.

We appreciate your leadership on this important issue and look forward to engaging with the legislature, administration, and community partners on improving mental health education and access to supports in schools.

Sincerely,



Michael K. Abbott,  
Chief Executive Officer

Tom Chard

Chief Executive Officer

Alaska Behavioral Health Association (ABHA)

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02/22/20

Representative Matt Claman

State Capitol Room 118

Juneau AK, 99801

[Representative.Matt.Claman@akleg.gov](mailto:Representative.Matt.Claman@akleg.gov)

Representative Claman –

Thank you for introducing House Bill 181. Testimony in support of the bill heard in House Education on February 17<sup>th</sup> and February 19<sup>th</sup> highlights the importance of the bill and the broad support for the legislation. The students that spoke in favor of the bill and the grave statistics from the CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), other school connectedness and climate surveys, and the data about lifelong impacts that we all struggle to turnaround were especially compelling. The bill is a very important step in reducing the stigma of mental illness that holds people back from seeking out the care they need.

We respectfully request that the Alaska Behavioral Health Association (ABHA), the Alaska Mental Health Board (AMHB), and the Statewide Suicide Prevention Council (SSPC) be added as statewide resources and that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) be added as national resources.

The Alaska Behavioral Health Association ([ABHA](#)) is the statewide network of behavioral health treatment providers. ABHA's members are providing behavioral health treatment from Prince of Wales to the Utqiagvik and from Eagle out to Adak. Our 70+ member organizations including tribal and non-tribal, for-profit and non-profit, secular and religious-based mental health and substance abuse treatment providers have come together to advance our common goal of access to quality, cost-effective treatment available to all Alaskans. Our providers are in the communities and often in the schools. We can offer both the technical expertise and the local understanding of the culture of the community to help achieve the intent of HB181.

The Alaska Mental Health Board ([AMHB](#)) is statutorily designated (A.S. §47.30.661) as the state planning and coordinating body for the purpose of federal and state laws relating to mental health services. The Board has several statutory responsibilities including: preparing and maintaining the comprehensive mental health plan, providing public forums for discussion of issues related to mental health services, advocating for the needs of individuals with mental disorders, and advising the legislature in matters affecting persons with mental disorders including about the development of necessary services and the effectiveness of programs. The Mental Health Board should be added because of their unique statutory role and responsibilities.

The Statewide Suicide Prevention Council ([SSPC](#)) is also established in statute (A.S. §44.29.300). The Council has the statutory responsibility to improve health and wellness throughout the state by reducing suicide and its effect on individuals, families, and communities; broaden the public’s awareness of suicide and the risk factors related to suicide; develop healthy communities through comprehensive, collaborative, community-based, and faith-based approaches; and developing partnership between public and private entities that will advance suicide prevention efforts in the state. Beyond their statutory responsibilities, the Statewide Suicide Prevention Council can help implement the intent of HB181 with the experience they have gained working in partnership with the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) to implement suicide prevention training in school districts across the state.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ([CDC](#)) have research and evidenced-based resources and guidelines that can be used by educators in classrooms in furtherance of House Bill 181’s intent. Additionally, the CDC developed and maintains the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System ([YRBSS](#)). The survey has been the go-to source for data that helps us better understand some of the challenges students face. Alaska’s YRBSS survey data is comparable to other states and to national averages. The surveys also provide good trend data including on topics such as persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, serious suicidal thoughts and suicidal attempts. Importantly, the survey results have been used to identify some of our biggest challenges and they have also been used to show the resilience and strength of our young people. Alaska’s Department of Health & Social Services, Division of Public Health, Section of Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion helps facilitate the [YRBSS program in our state](#).

Finally, ABHA recommends adding the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration ([SAMHSA](#)) to the list of national resources. SAMHSA is the agency within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that leads public health efforts to advance the behavioral health of the nation. Congress established SAMHSA in 1992 to make substance use and mental disorder information, services, and research more accessible to reduce the impact of substance abuse and mental illness on America’s communities. SAMHSA hosts nationwide Recovery Month activities every September to increase awareness and understanding of mental and substance use disorders and celebrate the people who recover. Students and schools could easily join in the activities as part of their health education efforts. SAMHSA also maintains a directory of evidenced-based practices including “Ready, Set, Go, Review: Screening for Behavioral Health Risk in Schools;” “After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools;” “Understanding A First Episode Of Psychosis Young Adult (Fact Sheets);” and “Supported Education Evidence-Based Practices (EBP).”

In addition to the more specific request to add the aforementioned resources to help support the bill, ABHA more generally recommends the following to help ensure success.

- Develop standards and support for educators to implement the intent of House Bill 181;
- Support school-based behavioral health services;
- Support community-based services that provide access to treatment;
- Incorporate all 8 Skills for a Healthy Life from Alaska Content Standards;<sup>1</sup>
- Continue to support the Youth Risk Behavior Survey and other School Connectedness and Climate Surveys;

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<sup>1</sup> Alaska Content Standards: Skills for a Healthy Life can be found online at: <https://education.alaska.gov/akstandards/Skills-for-Healthy-Life.pdf>. Accessed 21 Feb 2020.

- Continue to support the collaboration between the Statewide Suicide Prevention Council (SSPC) and Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) that has provided resources for training and suicide prevention activities in school districts across the state.

Effectively engaging with these resources can implement House Bill 181 in a more cost-effective manner. Using existing resources and relying on state and local expertise can help avoid the unnecessary effort and cost of recreating the support needed to implement House Bill 181. Incorporating the more general recommendations will help ensure that this important legislation has the impact intended.

We are happy to help support this legislation in both its adoption and implementation. Thank you again for your leadership in addressing this issue.



Tom Chard  
Alaska Behavioral Health Association

Cc: Bev Schoonover, Executive Director Alaska Mental Health Board and Statewide Suicide Prevention Council; Gina Agron, Department of Health & Social Services, Division of Public Health, Section of Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) Coordinator.

**From:** [Emma Steinzeig](#)  
**To:** [Rep. Matt Claman](#); [Rep. Harriet Drummond](#); [Rep. Grier Hopkins](#); [Rep. Andi Story](#)  
**Subject:** HB 181  
**Date:** Tuesday, February 25, 2020 3:46:59 PM

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Hello,

My name is Emma Steinzeig and I am in my final semester of graduate school. I am in the MSW program at UAA. Through my two years in this program, I have had opportunities to meet with various clients, from all walks of life. At my current practicum placement, I meet with children and families. We see all sorts of behavior problems, to trouble sleeping, lying, school issues, ADHD, etc. We see as many as we can, but often times have to refer our clients out to see a different provider, such as a play therapist or a psychologist for a neuropsych.

I believe that HB 181, which is an act relating to mental health education, is vitally important. As a sponsor of this bill, you obviously understand the importance of educating children on all aspects of their health, which includes their mental health. I believe that the passing of this bill will help school age children for decades to come, and I would like to offer my support of this bill.

Thank you for all you do for the State of Alaska.

Emma Steinzeig