

ANCHORAGE FIRE DEPARTMENT



*Austin Quinn-Davidson,
Acting Mayor*

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*Jodie Hettrick
Fire Chief*

April 30, 2021

The Honorable Senator David Wilson
Chair, Senate Health and Social Services Committee
State Capitol, Room 118
Juneau, AK 99801

Dear Senator Wilson,

Thank you for your work on Senate Bill 124 Mental Health Facilities and Meds. The Anchorage Fire Department (AFD) provides all hazards prevention, emergency response, and mitigation services to the Municipality of Anchorage, responding to over 36,000 requests for emergency service in 2020. Approximately 67% of responses were emergency medical in nature, with over 1,000 patient contacts assessed as behavioral health emergencies.

The AFD recognizes many of our responses are to people in behavioral health crisis. Unfortunately, our only recourse has been to transport them to a hospital emergency department, often repeatedly. In 2018, the AFD implemented the Community Outreach, Referral, and Education (CORE) program to identify high utilizers of the 911 EMS system and work with these individuals to provide the right care at the right time. Many clients enrolled in the CORE Team include those with comorbidities of mental illness and substance use disorder.

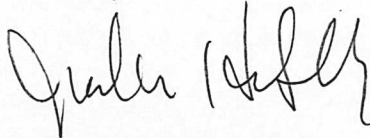
The success of the CORE Team, as well as other Municipal programs targeted at identifying the root cause of behavioral and mental health crisis prompted our organization to propose the implementation of a mobile health crisis response team. We are fortunate that the residents of the Municipality supported our vision, providing funding through the alcohol tax for the AFD Mobile Crisis Team (MCT) to begin operations in 2021.

The AFD MCT will respond directly to the location of an individual suffering from a behavioral health emergency. Many of these responses may be managed by keeping the individual in their current location (when safe to do so), while navigating them to the appropriate resources. Individuals who cannot remain in their current location will be transported to a facility to receive stabilizing care. Currently, these facilities are hospital emergency departments.

SB 124 will support the next step in addressing the mental health crisis in our community. For the AFD MCT to be successful, they must have a crisis stabilization center available to transport clients who are unable to be managed and left in place. Providing a qualified crisis stabilization center in Anchorage allows for an appropriate transport destination rather than a hospital emergency department. In many cases, the emergency departments are not appropriately resourced for patients experiencing a behavioral health emergency. This generates greater lengths of time the hospital emergency departments are on diversion to ambulance transports with other types of patients until necessary staffing, resources, and beds become available.

The AFD, with the support of the community, is proactively taking steps to provide appropriate care to our neighbors. The passage of SB 124 will continue our efforts to reduce the number of people left untreated in our community due to lack of resources.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jodie Hettrick". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Jodie" being more prominent than the last name "Hettrick".

Jodie Hettrick, Fire Chief
Anchorage Fire Department