

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE  
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

January 23, 2012

8:02 a.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Senator Kevin Meyer, Co-Chair  
Senator Joe Thomas, Co-Chair  
Senator Bettye Davis, Vice Chair  
Senator Gary Stevens

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

Senator Hollis French

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

SENATE BILL NO. 137

"An Act requiring suicide awareness and prevention training for certain school personnel."

- MOVED SB 137 OUT OF COMMITTEE

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

BILL: SB 137

SHORT TITLE: SUICIDE AWARENESS & PREVENTION TRAINING

SPONSOR(s): SENATOR(s) DAVIS

01/17/12	(S)	PREFILE RELEASED 1/6/12
01/17/12	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/17/12	(S)	EDC, FIN
01/23/12	(S)	EDC AT 8:00 AM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)

**WITNESS REGISTER**

THOMAS OBERMEYER, staff to Senator Davis  
Alaska State Legislature  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Provided sponsor summary of SB 137.

KATE BURKHART, Executive Director  
Statewide Suicide Prevention Council (SSPC)  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 137.

KATYA WASSILLIE, staff to Senator Davis  
Alaska State Legislature  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Provided information on SB 137.

CLARK FLATT, President  
The Jason Foundation  
Henderson, Tennessee

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 137.

SHARON STRUTZ-NORTON, representing herself  
Homer, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 137.

DEBORAH BOND, representing herself  
Seward, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 137.

JAMES BIELA, advocate  
American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP)  
Alaska Chapter  
Bethel, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 137.

ANN SCHAACK, advocate  
North Star Behavioral Health Center  
The Jason Foundation-Alaska  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 137.

JOHN ALCANTRA, Director of Government Relations  
National Education Association-Alaska (NEA-Alaska)  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 137.

CYNTHIA CURRAN, Director  
Teaching and Learning Support  
Department of Education and Early Development  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Neutral on SB 137.

LES MORSE, Deputy Commissioner  
Department of Education and Early Development  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Neutral on SB 137.

#### **ACTION NARRATIVE**

8:02:08 AM

**CO-CHAIR KEVIN MEYER** called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:02 a.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Davis, Stevens, Co-Chair Thomas and Co-Chair Meyer.

**SB 137-SUICIDE AWARENESS & PREVENTION TRAINING**

8:03:21 AM

CO-CHAIR MEYER announced the consideration of SB 137.

8:04:04 AM

SENATOR DAVIS, SB 137 sponsor, explained that SB 137 would assist school personnel to better understand suicide awareness and prevention.

8:05:28 AM

THOMAS OBERMEYER, staff to Senator Davis, said SB 137 is an act requiring suicide awareness and prevention training for certain school personnel. He stated that SB 137, 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 third leading cause of death for ages 10-24 and the number one cause of death for Alaskans under the age of 50 years.

Awareness and education are keys 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 of at-risk youth and are prepared to intervene when they identify a problem.

MR. OBERMEYER said 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 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 versus 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 the same age group; 1369 suicides in 176 Alaska communities between 2000 and 2009, 11 per month, 2.6 per week; 78-percent of suicides were committed by men and 22-percent by women who made twice as many but had many more failed attempts; 90-percent 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-percent of Alaska high school students reported they seriously considered suicide; 8.7 percent of Alaska High School Students actually attempted suicide one or more times; 2.7 percent of Alaska High School Students attempted suicide resulting in injury, poisoning, or overdose treated by a doctor or nurse.

MR. OBERMEYER said "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 of suicide prevention which has proven successful in other states.

[8:09:26 AM](#)

MR. OBERMEYER said 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 a 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 percent of the costs of Alaska suicide hospitalizations were paid through public funding sources and 15 percent 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.

[8:10:38 AM](#)

MR. OBERMEYER referencing a letter from Kate Burkhart, Executive Director, Statewide Suicide Prevention Council (SSPC), quoted:

"while the council endorsed the state suicidal prevention strategy mandating training for all school district personnel, children and youth interact with more than just their teachers at school; coaches, cafeteria staff, maintenance staff, librarians and others, all have a chance to support our youth and save a life."

MR. OBERMEYER said SB 137 does not mandate one particular program or set of materials and that The Jason Foundation recommends multiple sources to assist in suicide prevention. He said \$60,000 would be required to initiate the program, two thirds of the cost attributed to vendors' fees.

[8:12:32 AM](#)

SENATOR DAVIS said she received input from the Department of Education and Early Development along with various school districts.

[8:14:15 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS asked what the at-risk suicide signs are.

CO-CHAIR MEYER answered that forthcoming public testimony would answer his question.

[8:14:57 AM](#)

KATE BURKHART, Executive Director, SSPC, said suicide warning signs were noted on page 37 in the SB 137 Sponsor's Packet. She explained that in addition to The Jason Foundation, the Division of Behavioral Health offers the Alaska Gatekeeper Suicide Prevention Training Program at no cost and the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium offers the Intervention Skills Training Program for a fee.

[8:18:16 AM](#)

MS. BURKHART said Alaska's Trust Training Cooperative (TTC), offers the Mental Health First Aid program. She said Governor Parnell had prioritized suicide prevention in his proposed budget, which includes a pilot-training program for all high school educators and staff, and the SSPC's priority is to have mandated suicide prevention training for school personnel.

[8:20:15 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS said suicide is an enormous problem in Alaska. He asked if she had participated in the suicide training programs that teachers will be required to take.

MS. BURKHART answered no, only generalized suicide training programs.

[8:21:43 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS asked about the time required for mandated training.

[8:21:56 AM](#)

MS. BURKHART answered two hours. She said other voluntary program training periods vary; the DHSS Gatekeeper Program takes two days, the TCC Mental Health First Aid Program takes up to three days.

[8:23:26 AM](#)

KATYA WASSILLIE, staff to Senator Davis, explained the positive impact SB 137 would have on rural Alaska. She detailed her background, having attended school in nine different Alaskan villages and stated that suicide directly affected her life through family and friends. She said village-based teachers tend to interact with students more frequently outside of the classroom and believed SB 137 would assist them to better access struggling students' internal issues and provide the opportune assistance to avoid suicide.

[8:25:39 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS asked if some suicides occurred in waves or in a copy-cat manner.

[8:25:58 AM](#)

MS. WASSILLIE referred to a suicide-pact in Shaktoolik, Alaska where friends agreed to commit suicide together; one individual committed suicide and others attempted. She surmised that attention given from attempted suicide may affect other individuals in a peer group setting.

SENATOR STEVENS commented that early suicide detection and response could help alleviate further suicide incidents.

MS. WASSILLIE agreed.

[8:27:25 AM](#)

CLARK FLATT, President, The Jason Foundation, said The Jason Flatt Act was initiated to be an educational force for students, teachers, educators, youth workers, and communities. He said teachers are better equipped to see behavioral changes before parents do and declared that the most important act a state could do is train its educators and provide resources to detect early warning signs for youth suicide prevention. He noted within the past five years, six states enacted the Jason Flatt Act, one of them, Tennessee, had shown a reduction in youth suicide rates by 31 percent in 2009 and 17 percent in 2010.

He said The Jason Foundation and The American Foundation of Suicide Prevention (AFSP) would provide, free of charge, access to their on-line library and DVD Facilitator Packets; the DVD programs are two hours in length and well suited for instructing individuals located in Alaska's remote regions. He emphasized, beyond The Jason Foundation and the AFSP, the use of additional suicide awareness resources.

[8:31:49 AM](#)

MR. FLATT said The Jason Foundation had opened an office in the North Star Behavioral Health Center-Anchorage. He summarized that, based upon feedback from teachers in states that had mandated suicide training; SB 137 would also save lives in Alaska.

[8:34:40 AM](#)

SHARON STRUTZ-NORTON, representing herself, said she is a Family Psychiatric and Mental Health Nurse Practitioner, Statewide Suicide Prevention Council (SSPC) member, AFSP-Alaska member, and a family suicide survivor. She spoke at the Alaska School

Counselor Association's (ASCA) Annual Conference and discussed the support given for mandatory suicide prevention education and training. She referred to properly trained school personnel as "gatekeepers" who are ideally positioned to recognize suicide behavioral signs and treatment referral.

[8:38:35 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS asked what would happen if a teacher overheard students talking about suicide.

[8:38:53 AM](#)

MS. STRUTZ-NORTON answered that a teacher should recognize student behavioral changes and refers at-risk students to a counselor or get other staff members to assist in risk assessment.

[8:39:16 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS asked what would happen in a rural village.

[8:39:27 AM](#)

MS. STRUTZ-NORTON answered that suicide awareness education would help school staff members to respond appropriately.

SENATOR STEVENS said he had a concern for suicide prevention support in rural villages without counselors.

[8:40:45 AM](#)

DEBORAH BOND, representing herself, said she lost her son to suicide. He was a bullying victim and misunderstood by the school staff. She said educators with suicide awareness training would help save children's lives.

[8:42:39 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS commented on the possible connection between bullying and suicide.

[8:43:27 AM](#)

JAMES BIELA, advocate, AFSP-Alaska, said his background as a registered trainer for the Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST), helped prevent a suicide in 2010. He noted the importance for training an entire school's staff via multiple suicide awareness programs.

[8:45:44 AM](#)

ANN SCHAACK, advocate, North Star Behavioral Health Center-Anchorage and The Jason Foundation-Alaska, said Alaska's youth suicide rates are alarmingly high and school personnel equipped

with suicide prevention tools and resources help identify at-risk youth and connect them with support.

[8:47:02 AM](#)

JOHN ALCANTRA, Director of Government Relations, National Education Association-Alaska (NEA-Alaska), said NEA-Alaska met with Senator Davis and recommended mandatory suicide prevention training to include all school personnel. He said the required two-hour training could inspire school personnel to voluntarily take additional courses. He recommended that SB 137 not include a fiscal note, but said he recognized a cost impact from vendor fees and staff training time, and those expenses could be offset by using non-fee based resources.

[8:51:00 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER said fiscal notes would be addressed by the Senate Finance Committee.

[8:52:19 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS said he was concerned about implementing a program in smaller schools where professional support was not in the area.

[8:52:54 AM](#)

CYNTHIA CURRAN, Director, Teaching and Learning Support, Department of Education and Early Development, answered that a health education team works with school district personnel and provides resource support.

SENATOR STEVENS asked about response to ambiguous suicide warning signs.

[8:54:26 AM](#)

MS. CURRAN answered that knowing the student, behavior differences and risk factors would help teachers understand and recognize warning signs.

SENATOR STEVENS said parents should be aware of the warning signs as well.

[8:55:00 AM](#)

SENATOR DAVIS asked about the fiscal note.

[8:55:17 AM](#)

MS. CURRAN explained that the fiscal note related primarily to course development costs. She said rather than an in-service format, an "E-Learning Module" would be used to allow teachers

to train at their convenience and permit the department to track their progress.

SENATOR DAVIS asked that all suicide awareness resources be compiled to address costs with the Senate Finance Committee.

[8:57:27 AM](#)

MS. CURRAN answered that the department would comply.

SENATOR DAVIS said she would provide the department with her suicide awareness resource list. She admonished the department for its neutrality and not taking a supportive stance.

LES MORSE, Deputy Commissioner, Department of Education and Early Development, said the department recognizes suicide as a problem and wanted to avoid premature comments on legislation be avoided. He said possible solutions should be deliberated and deployed by the committee.

[8:59:18 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER asked Senator Davis to work with the department to scrutinize the fiscal note.

[9:00:05 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR THOMAS moved to report SB 137 from committee with individual recommendations and attached fiscal note.

[9:00:18 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER announced that without objection, SB 137 moved from the Senate Education Standing Committee.

[9:01:23 AM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, CO-CHAIR MEYER adjourned the meeting at 9:01 a.m.