

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE COMMUNITY AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS STANDING COMMITTEE

April 4, 2017

8:06 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Zach Fansler, Co-Chair
Representative Harriet Drummond
Representative Dean Westlake
Representative Dan Saddler
Representative David Talerico

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative Justin Parish, Co-Chair
Representative George Rauscher
Representative Jonathan Kreiss-Tomkins (alternate)
Representative DeLena Johnson (alternate)

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

HOUSE BILL NO. 138

"An Act establishing the month of March as Sobriety Awareness Month."

- MOVED HB 138 OUT OF COMMITTEE

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: HB 138

SHORT TITLE: MARCH: SOBRIETY AWARENESS MONTH

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) WESTLAKE

02/22/17	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
02/22/17	(H)	HSS, CRA
03/07/17	(H)	HSS AT 3:00 PM CAPITOL 106
03/07/17	(H)	Heard & Held
03/07/17	(H)	MINUTE(HSS)
03/23/17	(H)	HSS AT 3:00 PM CAPITOL 106
03/23/17	(H)	Moved HB 138 Out of Committee
03/23/17	(H)	MINUTE(HSS)
03/24/17	(H)	HSS RPT 6DP 1NR
03/24/17	(H)	DP: JOHNSTON, TARR, EDGMON, SULLIVAN- LEONARD, KITO, SPOHNHOLZ
03/24/17	(H)	NR: EASTMAN
04/04/17	(H)	CRA AT 8:00 AM BARNES 124

WITNESS REGISTER

FORREST WOLFE, Staff
Representative Dean Westlake
Alaska State Legislature

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented HB 138 on behalf of Representative Westlake, prime sponsor.

GREGORY NOTHSTINE, President
Sobermiut Reviving our Spirit
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 138.

STACY B. TONER, Deputy Director
Division of Behavioral Health
Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS)
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions during the hearing on HB 138.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[8:06:58 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR ZACH FANSLER called the House Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:06 a.m. Representatives Westlake, Talerico, Drummond, Saddler, and Fansler were present at the call to order.

HB 138-MARCH: SOBRIETY AWARENESS MONTH

[8:08:04 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR FANSLER announced that the only order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 138, "An Act establishing the month of March as Sobriety Awareness Month."

[8:08:38 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE WESTLAKE, as prime sponsor, introduced HB 138. He paraphrased the sponsor statement, which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

House Bill 138 seeks to have the State of Alaska recognize March as Sobriety Awareness Month. The purpose of Sobriety Awareness Month is to call

attention to Alaska's aggregate population of citizens, who practice a positive and healthy non-consumer lifestyle of any mood/mind altering substances. Sobriety Awareness Month is an opportunity for schools, community groups, and other public and private agencies and individuals to recognize, appreciate, and celebrate the existence of all Alaska's citizenry, who by virtue of their freely chosen lifestyle, serve as Living-Examples-To-The-Truth (LETTT) that life can be lived and enjoyed without having to consume mood/mind altering substances.

Individuals that lead a sober life are an asset to Alaska in that they can help reduce the incidence of alcohol or drug related social ills such as crime, domestic violence, and child abuse & neglect.

Please join me in support of recognizing this valuable group of Alaskans and their lifestyle.

REPRESENTATIVE WESTLAKE added that the proposed legislation would designate March of each year as "Sobriety Awareness Month".

[8:09:56 AM](#)

FORREST WOLFE, Staff, Representative Dean Westlake, presented HB 138 on behalf of Representative Westlake, prime sponsor. He directed attention to a handout in the committee bill packet providing the language of AS 47.37.010, also known as the Uniform Alcoholism and Intoxication Act. He cited the first sentence following the declaration of policy, which read as follows:

It is the policy of the state to recognize, appreciate, and reinforce the example set by its citizens who lead, believe in, and support a life of sobriety.

MR. WOLFE stated the sponsor's belief is that by permanently designating March as "Sobriety Awareness Month", HB 138 will help the State of Alaska "meet this declaration and policy." He noted that the individual who brought the idea for this legislation to the attention of Representative Westlake and his staff was available today to testify. He further observed that

someone from the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) was available, as well.

[8:11:19 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER asked for the definition of "sobriety".

REPRESENTATIVE WESTLAKE answered that it means a life "free of any substances out there." He said he spoke with people in the Native village of Eyak, in Cordova, Alaska, in November [2016] when the community spoke about sobriety and shared how long each individual had been sober. He indicated that the proposed legislation recognizes the accomplishments of those who have maintained sobriety and are role models who know that "you can pick yourself up." He said the substances include alcohol and drugs, and sobriety means "getting back integrated without being dependent ... on anything else other than yourself."

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER asked what the effect would be of state sobriety awareness month.

REPRESENTATIVE WESTLAKE said he wants to see a statewide celebration and focus on sobriety, because currently the issue is in a patchwork of awareness. He proposed that HB 138 is more than a feel-good bill; it is a do-good bill. It would give people "a conduit to get out there and celebrate." It would be recognition of those who have worked toward sobriety, even those who have fallen and had to find sobriety again.

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER asked what changes would be effected under HB 138.

REPRESENTATIVE WESTLAKE answered that he has no idea, because it would be "up to the people on how they make that difference." He added, "I'm hoping ... it's something I never even dreamed of."

[8:14:18 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR FANSLER opened public testimony on HB 138.

[8:14:37 AM](#)

GREGORY NOTHSTINE, President, Sobermiut Reviving our Spirit, testified that he has a history with sobriety awareness, as the legislation was introduced in the House in 1995. He said there are citizens in the state who have never consumed any "mind-

altering" beverages and children who have not yet been affected by [alcohol], cigarettes, or mind-altering substances. He said the problem has been redefined each year. He mentioned the "People of Peril" series in the Anchorage Daily News and the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) Blue Ribbon Council, and he said the council was asked what the next step should be since "all these big federally funded programs" were focusing on the problem of drug and alcohol abuse and helping the public understand the devastating effects of substance abuse. Mr. Gregory said the late General Schaeffer (ph), at that time asked what could be done differently, since the focus on the issue was not making it go away. One idea was to focus on all the people who [are sober] and how their influence helps the communities in which they live. He said these living examples are missed when the focus is only placed on the problem. He said he thinks HB 138 will help put the focus on those who are choosing sobriety as a way of life they enjoy and doing so of free will. Mr. Nothstine stated that there is not social permission for someone to say, "This is the way of life I choose to live." He emphasized the need to show the merits of living a healthy lifestyle.

[8:19:44 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER noted that Mr. Nothstine is part of an organization that promotes sobriety as a way of life, and he asked him to describe how HB 138 would help him in his efforts.

MR. NOTHSTINE stated his belief that the proposed legislation would support any such organization to help the state. He explained that the state already has a declaration of policy, but he questioned how many organizations are currently helping the state to reinforce it. The proposed legislation would put those organizations in a position to do so.

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER asked the reason why March should be the month chosen.

MR. NOTHSTINE surmised that it is a kind of follow-up of numerous past legislation that has been introduced between 1996 and 2005. He mentioned that the AFN gave names [to dogs who run] the Iditarod, as a way to honor people, and he indicated that was in March. He said there is already an alcohol awareness month and "we already know enough about alcohol," yet there is no focus on people who are sober by choice, and it's an appropriate time to utilize March as "Sobriety Awareness Month".

8:22:40 AM

REPRESENTATIVE WESTLAKE said he did not have the statistics to answer the question. Notwithstanding that, he noted that from January to April, the Alaska Psychiatric Institute (API) is booked and has to turn people away. He said the suicides are terrible. He said spring signifies a new beginning, so March seemed like an appropriate time.

8:24:22 AM

STACY B. TONER, Deputy Director, Division of Behavioral Health, Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS), responded to Representative Saddler's question about the advantages of choosing March as the month. She said she could envision the division formulating sobriety celebrations with the division's grantees and providers in the community. She said, "We do this for recovery month in September where we're helping to support community awareness campaigns and celebrations." She said the focus would be both on the treatment side as well as on those communities with coalitions focused on prevention. In response to a follow-up question, she said recovery month is a federal initiative, and recovery is the option for those who have had an issue with drugs or alcohol and have worked to heal from it. Conversely, sobriety, although it can mean a life in recovery, is also the choice to be drug, alcohol, or substance-free, and it can be a choice made by a person before he/she has an issue. She concluded, "It might be splitting hairs, but they're a little different."

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER asked what percentage of the division's work addresses those who do abuse alcohol or drugs.

MS. TONER estimated more than 65 percent. She said API constitutes a large portion of the division's work. She said that might be a low number, because there are so many people with "co-occurring issues."

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER asked for a rough estimate of how the state's budget would be affected if half the people currently addicted to drugs and/or alcohol were no longer so.

MS. TONER answered that the division has a large amount of money going out of Medicaid to treat people with substance abuse and mental health issues. She presumed that the savings to the state in having a state full of sober people would be \$80-\$100 million. She qualified that her answer is to a question that is

"out there on the edge." She said the opioid epidemic is taking many lives, and "we haven't even begun to ... touch on how much impact that's having."

[8:29:35 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR FANSLER, after ascertaining that there was no one who wished to testify, closed public testimony on HB 138.

CO-CHAIR FANSLER said HB 138 had been heard twice by the House Health and Social Services Standing Committee, and he stated his intention to pass it out of committee today following committee discussion.

[8:30:41 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER stated that while he sometimes has a cynical view of what the government can do in people's lives, he does see that the cost on and damage of people's lives as a result of drug and alcohol abuse is significant enough that it would be worthwhile for the state to do everything it can to "create the social encouragement of a sober lifestyle." He said peer pressure is often the reason people try alcohol or drugs for the first time, and he opined that if the state can have an influence in peer pressure that encourages people to be straight and sober, then that would be beneficial and the state should do everything in its power to make that happen.

[8:31:37 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR FANSLER stated that he thinks HB 138 is worthwhile and could save the state money by encouraging people to live a sober lifestyle and recognizing those who are.

[8:32:06 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND moved to report HB 138 out of committee with individual recommendations and the accompanying fiscal notes. There being no objection, HB 138 was reported out of the House Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee.

[8:32:49 AM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 8:33 a.m. to 8:34 a.m.

[8:34:35 AM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 8:34 a.m.