

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE**  
**HOUSE HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES STANDING COMMITTEE**

April 11, 2024

5:39 p.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Representative Mike Prax, Chair  
Representative Justin Ruffridge, Vice Chair  
Representative CJ McCormick  
Representative Dan Saddler  
Representative Jesse Sumner  
Representative Zack Fields  
Representative Genevieve Mina

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

All members present

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

CS FOR SENATE BILL NO. 24 (FIN)

"An Act relating to mental health education; and providing for an effective date."

- HEARD & HELD

HOUSE BILL NO. 366

"An Act relating to residential psychiatric treatment centers; and providing for an effective date."

- RESCINDED ACTION ON MOVING OUT 4/4/24

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

BILL: SB 24

SHORT TITLE: PUBLIC SCHOOLS: MENTAL HEALTH EDUCATION

SPONSOR(s): SENATOR(s) GRAY-JACKSON

01/18/23	(S)	PREFILE RELEASED 1/9/23
01/18/23	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/18/23	(S)	EDC, HSS, FIN
02/22/23	(S)	EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)
02/22/23	(S)	Heard & Held
02/22/23	(S)	MINUTE(EDC)
03/06/23	(S)	EDC AT 3:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)
03/06/23	(S)	Moved SB 24 Out of Committee

03/06/23 (S) MINUTE (EDC)  
 03/08/23 (S) EDC RPT 4DP 1NR  
 03/08/23 (S) DP: TOBIN, GRAY-JACKSON, STEVENS, KIEHL  
 03/08/23 (S) NR: BJORKMAN  
 03/23/23 (S) HSS AT 3:30 PM BUTROVICH 205  
 03/23/23 (S) Heard & Held  
 03/23/23 (S) MINUTE (HSS)  
 04/11/23 (S) HSS AT 3:30 PM BUTROVICH 205  
 04/11/23 (S) Heard & Held  
 04/11/23 (S) MINUTE (HSS)  
 04/13/23 (S) HSS AT 3:30 PM BUTROVICH 205  
 04/13/23 (S) Moved CSSB 24 (HSS) Out of Committee  
 04/13/23 (S) MINUTE (HSS)  
 04/14/23 (S) HSS RPT CS 3DP 2NR SAME TITLE  
 04/14/23 (S) NR: WILSON, KAUFMAN  
 04/14/23 (S) DP: TOBIN, DUNBAR, GIESSEL  
 02/07/24 (S) FIN AT 9:00 AM SENATE FINANCE 532  
 02/07/24 (S) Heard & Held  
 02/07/24 (S) MINUTE (FIN)  
 02/15/24 (S) FIN AT 1:30 PM SENATE FINANCE 532  
 02/15/24 (S) Moved CSSB 24 (FIN) Out of Committee  
 02/15/24 (S) MINUTE (FIN)  
 02/19/24 (S) FIN RPT CS 4DP SAME TITLE  
 02/19/24 (S) DP: HOFFMAN, OLSON, KIEHL, BISHOP  
 03/06/24 (S) TRANSMITTED TO (H)  
 03/06/24 (S) VERSION: CSSB 24 (FIN)  
 03/11/24 (H) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS  
 03/11/24 (H) HSS, EDC, FIN  
 04/11/24 (H) HSS AT 3:00 PM DAVIS 106

**BILL: HB 366**

SHORT TITLE: MINORS & RESIDENT PSYCH TREATMENT CENTERS  
 SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) DIBERT

02/20/24 (H) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS  
 02/20/24 (H) HSS, L&C  
 04/04/24 (H) HSS AT 3:00 PM DAVIS 106  
 04/04/24 (H) Moved HB 366 Out of Committee  
 04/04/24 (H) MINUTE (HSS)  
 04/10/24 (H) L&C AT 3:15 PM BARNES 124  
 04/10/24 (H) -- MEETING CANCELED --  
 04/11/24 (H) HSS AT 3:00 PM DAVIS 106

**WITNESS REGISTER**

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON  
 Alaska State Legislature

Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** As prime sponsor, presented CSSB 24(FIN).

BESSE ODOM, Staff

Senator Gray-Jackson

Alaska State Legislature

Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Gave the sectional analysis for CSSB 24(FIN) on behalf of Senator Gray-Jackson, prime sponsor.

STEVEN PEARCE, Director

Citizen's Commission on Human Rights

Seattle, Washington

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified during the hearing on CSSB 24(FIN).

NAN VOORHEES, representing self

Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of CSSB 24(FIN).

ANN RINGSTAD, Executive Director

National Alliance on Mental Illness - Alaska

Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of CSSB 24(FIN) and answered questions.

#### **ACTION NARRATIVE**

[5:40:04 PM](#)

**CHAIR PRAX** called the House Health and Social Services Standing Committee meeting to order at 5:39 p.m. Representatives Fields, Sumner, Ruffridge, and Prax were present at the call to order. Representatives Saddler, Mina, and McCormick arrived as the meeting was in progress.

#### **SB 24-PUBLIC SCHOOLS: MENTAL HEALTH EDUCATION**

[5:41:03 PM](#)

CHAIR PRAX announced that the first order of business would be CS FOR SENATE BILL NO. 24(FIN), "An Act relating to mental health education; and providing for an effective date."

[5:41:47 PM](#)

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON, Alaska State Legislature, as prime sponsor, presented CSSB 24(FIN). She paraphrased the sponsor statement [included in the committee packet], which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

CSSB 24 amends the existing health education curriculum statute to include mental health in all K-12 health classrooms to adequately educate students on vital information pertaining to mental health symptoms, resources, and treatment.

The Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development and the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) will develop guidelines for instruction in mental health in consultation with numerous stakeholders. Such organizations include, but are not limited to, the National Council for Behavioral Health, Providence Health and Services Alaska, Southcentral Foundation, Anchorage Community Mental Health Services, Inc., North Star Behavioral Health System, and the National Alliance on Mental Health Illness Alaska. The standards will be developed in consultation with counselors, educators, students, administrators, and other mental health organizations to form effective guidelines for school boards, teachers, and students.

After standards have been developed, the Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development and DEED will be responsible for implementation throughout the Alaska school system. As with existing health education curriculum, the DEED, the Department of Health, and the Council on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault will provide technical assistance to school districts in the development of personal safety curricula. An existing school health education specialist position will assist in coordinating the program statewide.

CSSB 24 aims to decrease the stigma surrounding mental illnesses and increase students' knowledge of mental health, encouraging conversation around and understanding of the issue.

[5:44:47 PM](#)

BESSE ODOM, Staff, Senator Gray-Jackson, Alaska State Legislature, on behalf of Senator Gray-Jackson, prime sponsor, gave the sectional analysis for CSSB 24(FIN) [included in the committee packet], which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Section 1: The uncodified law of the State of Alaska is amended by adding a new section to read Legislative Intent. This section specifies what entities will develop guidelines for instruction in mental health.

Section 2: This section amends AS 14.03.016(a) which is the statute that relates to a parent's right to direct the education of the [sic] their child, by adding a new subsection that would allow parents to be notified at least two weeks before any class or program regarding mental health is offered.

Section 3: This section amends AS 14.30.360(a) which addresses health education curriculum and physical activity guidelines by removing the word "physical" when referencing instruction for health education and adding "mental health" and "physical health" to the list of curriculum items each district includes in their health education programs.

Section 4: This section amends AS 14.30.360(b) which addresses health education curriculum and physical activity guidelines. The section clarifies that developmentally appropriate instruction in mental health be developed by the state board in consult with the Department of Health, Department of Family and Community Services and other entities. The section also list the Department of Family and Community Services as one of many entities that shall provide technical assistance to school districts in the development of personal safety curricula upon request.

Section 5: The uncodified law of the State of Alaska is amended by adding a new section to read Report to the Legislature. This section clarifies that a report must be given to the Senate Secretary and Chief Clerk of the House of Representatives. This report must include a copy of developmentally appropriate instruction in mental health developed by the State Board of Education and Early Development and describe the process used to develop such guidelines.

Section 6: The uncodified law of the State of Alaska is amended by adding a new section to read Transition. Specifically, the section requires that the state Board of Education and Early Development shall develop the mental health guidelines within two years after the effective date of this Act.

Section 7: This section sets an effective date of July 1, 2024

[5:47:46 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX opened public testimony on CSSB 24(FIN).

[5:48:24 PM](#)

STEVEN PEARCE, Director, Citizen's Commission on Human Rights (CCHR), testified in opposition to CSSB 24(FIN). He said that schools must not exclusively push psychiatric options on parents and youth and there must be a comparison done between physical education in schools and the "message of mental health being taught in schools." He shared his opinion that schools are currently teaching subjects in a manner that is "known to cause an emotional situation that can mimic a psychiatric disorder." He said CCHR has provided a list of amendments to the committee that explain ways to improve CSSB 24(FIN) and bills similar to it and urged the legislature to adopt those suggested amendments.

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER asked Mr. Pearce if he had any experience or knowledge of similar curriculum in other states being applied and its effects in those states.

MR. PEARCE answered that schools in Washington and Montana are teaching mental health in a manner that is inconsistent with the recommendations listed on the website of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), which is causing issues for students in those states.

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER remarked that there is similar curriculum being taught in Washington and Montana that acknowledges a chemical imbalance as a valid qualifier for mental health.

MR. PEARCE posited that the current form of mental health education is "simply indoctrination to what the psychiatrists want you to know" and cited a website called

"alternativementalhealth.com" as a valid alternative to current mental health education.

[5:55:29 PM](#)

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON asked how many members were in Mr. Pearce's organization.

MR. PEARCE said he had dozens of members locally and a handful of members in Alaska, Washington, and Montana. He said that his organization was based out of Los Angeles.

[5:56:27 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER asked Mr. Pearce to clarify on whose behalf he was testifying.

MR. PEARCE clarified that he was speaking on behalf of CCHR.

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON asked whether there were any mental health professionals that were members of CCHR.

MR. PEARCE answered that CCHR has a board of directors that advises CCHR that is comprised of "knowers of alternative psychiatric care."

[5:58:10 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SUMNER asked Representative Saddler to clarify his previous question to Mr. Pearce.

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER said that his previous question was based off of a misconception.

[5:58:51 PM](#)

NAN VOORHEES\* representing self\* Anchorage, Alaska\* Testified in support of CSSB 24(FIN). { testified in support of CSSB 24(FIN). She said that the Center for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) estimated that one in six children between the ages of two and eight have some sort of mental health condition and added that up to 70 percent of children do not receive the help they need growing up. She shared her understanding that public schools are a big part of the solution in combatting mental health issues in Alaska and added that 16 other U.S. states in the union currently require some form of mandated mental health education in their K-8 curriculum.

[6:02:48 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER asked a clarifying question related to her testimony about how the word "suicide" was initially heard and taught to a child in 1st grade.

MS. VOORHEES, in response to Representative Saddler, explained that the child had heard the word "suicide" on the playground. She gave clarification to her comments related to the statistic that 70 percent of youth struggling with mental health do not receive the help they need and gave further clarification as to the statistics she gave related to the percentage of youth currently struggling with mental health.

[6:04:51 PM](#)

ANN RINGSTAD, Executive Director, National Alliance on Mental Illness - Alaska, testified in support of CSSB 24(FIN). She stressed the importance of having a safe place for a child to speak about their mental health and [speaking to children about] mental health at an age appropriate level. She said that strengthening guidelines will help to guide Alaska's youth throughout their early years. She highlighted that CSSB 24(FIN) aims to decrease the stigma surrounding mental illness and increase students' knowledge surrounding mental health.

[6:08:02 PM](#)

CHAIR PRAX asked whether NAMI has any sample curricula that are currently in place in other states.

MS. RINGSTAD said that NAMI is talking about guidelines for curricula. She further explained the need for the guidelines in Alaska and added that NAMI is aware that guidelines have not been changed in 20 years in Alaska and said that the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) and local school boards would have to be involved in development of curricula.

[6:09:29 PM](#)

CHAIR PRAX, after ascertaining there was no one else who wished to testify, closed public testimony on CSSB 24(FIN).

[6:09:45 PM](#)

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON said that her preference would be to make a motion to move the bill out of the House Health and Social Services Standing Committee today.

[6:10:17 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER asked what the term "mental health education" encompasses.

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON deferred her answer to Bessie Odom.

[6:10:58 PM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 6:11 p.m. to 6:12 p.m.

[6:12:54 PM](#)

MS. ODOM said that she would get the answer to the committee as soon as possible.

[6:13:17 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER asked how many hours a week students would receive mental health education under the guidelines proposed under CSSB 24(FIN).

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON deferred her answer to Ms. Ringstad.

[6:13:53 PM](#)

MS. RINGSTAD shared her anecdotal experience that the education would take place during half a quarter per school year and it would depend on each schools district's guidelines.

[6:14:41 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE FIELDS offered his understanding that CSSB 24(FIN) would give a fairly small time commitment to educators.

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER noted organizations listed in the bill and asked if or when parents would be consulted in developing guidelines for mental health education.

[6:15:38 PM](#)

MS. ODOM answered that parents have the right to be involved from the start and said that parents would be able to contribute to the guidelines moving forward.

REPRESENTATIVE SADDLER asked the bill sponsor if she would be amenable to specific amendments related to parental rights.

[6:17:22 PM](#)

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON confirmed that she would be okay with that.

[6:17:49 PM](#)

CHAIR PRAX noted that three of the seven members of the House Health and Social Services Standing Committee serve on the House Education Standing Committee where the bill would be heard next.

[6:18:05 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE FIELDS said he would be amenable to leave it to the House Education Standing Committee.

[6:18:12 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MINA said she would like to see CSSB 24(FIN) move forward to the House Education Standing Committee.

[6:18:28 PM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 6:18 p.m. to 6:19 p.m.

[6:19:03 PM](#)

CHAIR PRAX set an amendment deadline for CSSB 24(FIN) to Monday, April 15, 2024.

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX announced that CSSB 24(FIN) was held over.

**HB 366-MINORS & RESIDENT PSYCH TREATMENT CENTERS**

[6:19:59 PM](#)

CHAIR PRAX announced that the final order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 366, "An Act relating to residential psychiatric treatment centers; and providing for an effective date."

[6:20:25 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE RUFFRIDGE moved to rescind the House Health and Social Services Standing Committee's action on 4/4/24 in moving HB 366 out of committee. There being no objection, it was so ordered.

[6:21:03 PM](#)

**ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further business before the committee, the House Health and Social Services Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 6:21 p.m.