

HOUSE FINANCE COMMITTEE
April 23, 2025
1:36 p.m.

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CALL TO ORDER

Co-Chair Schrage called the House Finance Committee meeting to order at 1:36 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Neal Foster, Co-Chair
Representative Andy Josephson, Co-Chair
Representative Calvin Schrage, Co-Chair
Representative Jeremy Bynum
Representative Alyse Galvin
Representative Sara Hannan
Representative Nellie Unangiq Jimmie
Representative DeLena Johnson
Representative Will Stapp
Representative Frank Tomaszewski

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative Jamie Allard

ALSO PRESENT

Noah Klein, Associate Counsel, Alaska Court System; David Jiang, Staff, Representative Alyse Galvin; Andrea Mueca, Deputy Director, Division of Behavioral Health, Department of Health.

PRESENT VIA TELECONFERENCE

James Biela, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, Alaska Chapter, Bethel; Ruth Billy, Self, Panuak; Ann Ringstad, Executive Director, National Alliance on Mental Illness Alaska, Anchorage; Kelly Manning, Deputy Director, Division of Innovation and Education Excellence, Department of Education and Early Development, Juneau; Dr. Kristy Becker, Chief of Clinical Services, Alaska Psychiatric Institute, Anchorage.

SUMMARY

OVERVIEW: CAPITAL UPDATE

SB 57 APPROP: CAPITAL/FUNDS/REAPPROP

SB 57 was SCHEDULED but not HEARD.

HB 105 PUBLIC SCHOOLS: MENTAL HEALTH EDUCATION

HB 105 was HEARD and HELD in committee for further consideration.

Co-Chair Schrage reviewed the agenda.

^OVERVIEW: CAPITAL UPDATE

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NOAH KLEIN, ASSOCIATE COUNSEL, ALASKA COURT SYSTEM, introduced the PowerPoint presentation "House Finance Committee Alaska Court System: Capital Request" dated April 23, 2025 (copy on file). He began on slide 2 and gave an overview of the court system's FY 26 capital budget request. He noted that the slide reflected priorities identified by the Alaska Supreme Court the previous fall. He mentioned requests including \$22 million for phase two of the Palmer Courthouse expansion, \$2 million for court security projects, and \$3.525 million for deferred maintenance projects statewide. He made note of the final item on the slide comprised of the Sitka and Bethel courthouses, where the supreme court had identified an updated need for an updated or new facility, but there had been no feasible items identified.

Mr. Klein continued to slide 3, which addressed what was currently in HB 54, the capital budget bill from the executive branch. Of the approximately \$28 million requested by the supreme court, there was \$1 million for court security projects in the bill. He wanted to make sure the committee was aware of the supreme court's capital budget request considering the difficult fiscal year the state was facing.

Representative Johnson asked for further detail on how the court got its request brought forward.

Mr. Klein responded that typically in the summer progressing into the fall of each year, the supreme court looked at the court system's needs to determine a list of items that were deemed to be "reasonable asks." The list was presented to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) with the hope that the requests would be presented to the legislature to fund. He noted that historically the court system had differing amounts of luck with capital requests that were funded.

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Mr. Klein continued on slide 4 and identified what was in CSSB 57(FIN), which was not currently before the committee. On top of the \$1 million in court security projects presented in the current capital budget, the bill had an additional \$750,000 for deferred maintenance projects. There was no appropriation, but there was language encouraging the sale of a facility in Sitka to the court system.

Representative Johnson asked if the court system would be back before the committee when it considered the capital budget.

Mr. Klein continued to slide 5, which was a photo of the Palmer Courthouse.

Representative Johnson assumed that Mr. Klein would offer information related to the history of the courthouse and an explanation related to phase two of the expansion project.

Mr. Klein explained that the image showed the entrance to the Palmer Courthouse. He affirmed that he would discuss both phase 1 and phase 2 of the expansion project. He continued to slide 6 and explained that the expansion project was deemed a priority because the four superior court judges in Palmer were by far the busiest in the state. He cited that the average caseload for a superior court judge in the state was approximately 450 cases, and those in Palmer had over 660 cases each on average. He thought the high case load was not surprising considering that the last addition of a superior court judge in Palmer was almost twenty years previously. In that time period, the population had increased dramatically in the Matanuska-Susitna (Mat-Su) Valley from almost 80,000 to approximately

115,000. There was a growth expectation of an additional 20,000 in the following 20 years.

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Representative Galvin asked if Mr. Klein could explain how population expansion was being managed. She asked if the extra courthouse was needed in order to have an extra judge to handle the caseload.

Mr. Klein responded in the affirmative. The court had not been able to find a way to add courtrooms to the facility without expanding the courthouse. There were less court houses than there were judges in the building, and the goal was normally a one-to-one ratio. He discussed the challenge of scheduling and potential delays. The legislature had given additional judicial offices, but not superior court judges. He noted that judges worked extremely long hours and thought the Palmer judges had done a good job keeping up with items that had mandatory timelines. He identified the example that domestic relation matters took about 50 percent longer in Palmer than in Anchorage.

Representative Johnson thought it seemed as though some workload had been shifted from Palmer to the Anchorage court when possible. She asked Mr. Klein to expand.

Mr. Klein responded that anecdotally he had heard that at times and when possible, lawyers would choose to file in Anchorage to have a matter adjudicated on a faster timeline. He considered the practice problematic. He referenced a venue map for matters in Alaska and explained that the Palmer Courthouse served the entire valley.

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Mr. Klein continued on slide 6 and reiterated the need for more superior court judges in the Mat-Su Valley. He believed that the Department of Law had requested an additional attorney in the valley due to increasing workloads. He referenced the courtroom expansion request and explained that if the courthouse was expanded, the courts would be back to request operating funds for an additional judge position as well as supporting positions associated with a judge. He used the examples of a judicial assistant and a law clerk.

Mr. Klein discussed the history of the project. He thought the Palmer judges had been the busiest for at least five years running. In FY 23 the legislature had appropriated funds that were used for the preliminary design of an approximately \$35 million project. The design had provided for a three-courtroom expansion, a shell on top of the courtrooms, as well as additional clerk and security space. The courts had come to the legislature in FY 25 for the funding that had not been included in the original capital budget the previous year. At the request of the legislature, the courts provided a phasing plan. Phase 1 of the project was \$7.2 million, and the legislature had appropriated the funds. The \$7.2 million was for the full design of the project, site work, utility work, and other items such as capital overlay.

Mr. Klein continued that the courts had encumbered over \$3 million of the initial funds, primarily for a full design. The site was being prepped for utility expansion in the current year. He explained that the courts were currently asking for \$22.2 million for phase 2 of the project. Phase 2 included the three courtrooms through a building expansion, "shelf space" on top for future expansion needs, as well as the space for additional employees.

Representative Hannan asked about the phase 1 appropriation of \$7.2 million and whether it would cover the site work planned for the upcoming summer.

Mr. Klein indicated that the funding would cover the summer's site work, but if there were no additional appropriations for FY 26, it would necessitate further planning decisions.

Representative Hannan asked if there was any staging in the design that would keep the project moving forward despite not having the entire \$22 million in one appropriation.

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Mr. Klein responded that if the court system was unable to receive the full amount for phase 2, it would have to have conversations about whether the goal would be a smaller project or to further push out the project. He noted that pushing out the project was not desirable because another year would pass without an additional judge. He added that there had been other building projects in which the phases

did not work well together. He used the example of flooding repairs that were underway with differing repair needs in different phases.

Co-Chair Foster discussed phasing projects in order to keep the projects moving along. He mentioned mobilization of contractors and losing the momentum of a project due to phasing. He recognized the difficulties referenced by Mr. Klein.

Mr. Klein agreed with Co-Chair Foster and thought that if a smaller appropriation was available for the Palmer Courthouse, there could be conversation about a smaller scale project. He relayed that getting an additional superior court judge was the highest priority. He continued on to slide 7 and explained that the slide gave a representative view of the courthouse. Everything on the left-hand side was the Palmer Courthouse, which was connected to a state office building.

Mr. Klein continued to slide 8 and phase 2 of the project, which was shown in blue on the right-hand side of the slide. He described the layout of the project, with hallways expanding to a large lobby and a shell for potential future expansion. He referenced the last time the court system built a building in Fairbanks, a project which had utilized a similar shell and had created savings when the space was needed later.

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Representative Hannan asked if the expansion design would result in a courtyard being created and an open space between the corridors in the expansion.

Mr. Klein responded that the courtyard existed, and the expansion would close off the courtyard. He described that there was currently a "hallway to nowhere," which the project would block off.

Representative Hannan asked if the planned additional space was different than the courtyard and was over the courtroom expansion.

Mr. Klein responded in the affirmative. He relayed that he would need further discussion with the facilities design person to determine if the second story was the entire area

or just the area above the courtrooms. He noted that the design shown on the slide was from the preliminary design rather than from the updated design.

Representative Johnson reminded that the Palmer Courthouse had been around for quite some time, and that the state contracted to use some space in the building.

Mr. Klein responded that there was a Department of Corrections facility across the street and thought there was a subsurface connector tunnel among the facilities. He noted that considering the size of the project, the department had looked at all the nearby facilities to be as creative as possible. He was not certain about the ownership of the facility across the street.

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Representative Johnson relayed that she had recently found that there was not enough space to hold women at the Mat-Su pre-trial facility. She thought the area was a justice complex. She did not know when the original building was constructed but thought the needs had increased. She noted that she would be looking into the matter further.

Mr. Klein continued to slide 9 and the court system's second capital budget request priority of court security projects. He noted that there was currently \$1 million in proposed funding for court security projects in HB 54. The supreme court had requested \$2.15 million for court security projects. He relayed that court security had become important due to facilities nationwide seeing an increase in levels of violence towards members of court staff and the public. The department had been working for a number of years to update court security statewide, and the state had over 40 facilities that were very different. To the extent possible, the goal was to have an integrated alarm system and CCTV system where everything went to the court system security manager. Many of the projects in the past and future were all tied to the need for upgraded security in court buildings.

Mr. Klein continued that \$1.5 million of the request was for finishing an access control project in Anchorage, with the goal to move from physical hard key access to uniform key card access. The project was phased and was underway. The other court security projects requested in the current

year were physical projects such as hardening the judge's bench in Seward and a clerk's counter to make them ballistic safe. In the Diamond Courthouse in Juneau, the employee elevator was used for prisoner transport and there was no current system to let users know there was a prisoner in the elevator. He described potential security issues because of proximity to the staff and prisoners, and a notification system that would include a light on every floor to indicate when the elevator was in use for prisoner transport.

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Mr. Klein continued to slide 10 and discussed the court's deferred maintenance list. The department had contracted for numerous years with a contractor to help determine the list. He reminded that the courts had around 40 facilities statewide, and the total expected costs for the 31 highest priority projects was \$15 million. He noted that generally the department had been coming to the legislature requesting \$2.5 million to \$3.5 million per year to help keep in line with the deferred maintenance needs of the court system.

Representative Johnson asked about the locations of the different courthouses.

Mr. Klein discussed the facilities in the list of five projects for the FY 26 request. He mentioned Snowden, an administrative building that was the pre-statehood old Anchorage Times building. He noted the building had physical needs. Boney Courthouse was one of the two courthouses in Anchorage. The primary deferred maintenance project would be for the crumbling façade of the Snowden building. He mentioned water intrusion in multiple windows and the need for a full envelope replacement of the building. The building housed the court's administrative offices, accounting, and other functions. He continued to slide 11 which included a photo of the Snowden facility façade.

Mr. Klein moved to slide 12 and the Sitka and Bethel Courthouses, areas where the court had identified a future need. The facility in Sitka had maintenance issues outside the court system's control because it did not operate the building. He mentioned a \$2 million appropriation for purchase of the Stratton Library from the previous year,

which had been vetoed. He was not sure if the library was still an option for the court system. The lease in Bethel was set to expire in a couple of years, and there were issues in the facility. He mentioned the expense of the lease, and discussion of building a justice center with stakeholders such as the Bethel Native Association.

Representative Hannan commented that the need of the Palmer Courthouse was real, and that justice delayed was justice denied. She mentioned long wait times and higher caseloads. She mentioned her question about phasing the project and pondered that squeezing \$22 million out of the other body seemed difficult. She did not consider that the project proposed to "overbuild," but rather that it would meet the need. She hoped forward momentum could continue because prices were likely not going to decrease.

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RECONVENED

Co-Chair Foster took over chairing the meeting. He discussed the order of events.

#hb105

HOUSE BILL NO. 105

"An Act relating to mental health education."

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Representative Galvin introduced herself as the sponsor of the bill. She gave credit to Senator Elvi Gray-Jackson. She noted that the bill was not new and had been introduced before but not passed [SB 24 passed the Senate but not the House in 2024.] She referenced the mental health budget being recently taken up on the House floor, and thought the committee was familiar with many of the state's needs as well as the desire to do something different. The bill represented an effort to address mental health challenges facing youth. She read the sponsor statement (copy on file):

HB 105 represents a significant effort to address the mental health challenges facing our youth. This

legislation recognizes that mental health education is a vital component of a comprehensive K-12 curriculum and aims to ensure it is treated with the same level of importance as physical health education.

To achieve this, the bill directs the Board of Education & Early Development to work alongside the Department of Health, the Department of Family and Community Services, regional tribal health organizations, and both national and state mental health experts. This collaborative effort will ensure that mental health instruction is developed with input from a broad range of professionals, leading to a well-rounded and effective curriculum.

Acknowledging the essential role of parents in their children's education, HB 105 includes a provision requiring schools to notify parents or guardians at least two weeks before introducing any mental health instruction. This measure promotes transparency, strengthens trust between schools and families, and encourages parental involvement in their child's learning experience.

By revising existing health education laws, this bill guarantees that mental health receives the same priority as physical health in Alaska's K-12 education system. The Board of Education will be responsible for creating clear, age-appropriate guidelines to integrate mental health instruction effectively into classrooms. To maintain oversight and accountability, HB 105 requires the Board of Education to submit a report to the Legislature within two years of the law's enactment. This report will outline the established mental health education guidelines and detail the process used in their development, ensuring lawmakers stay informed on its progress and implementation.

The bill also allows for a two-year transition period, providing sufficient time for careful planning, stakeholder input, and curriculum preparation before mental health instruction is fully implemented in schools.

HB 105 is a proactive measure designed to equip Alaska's students with the knowledge and resources

they need to understand and manage their mental well-being. By fostering collaboration among education and health professionals, this legislation lays the foundation for a healthier, more resilient generation. I encourage my colleagues to support this critical initiative.

Representative Galvin stressed the importance of families learning at the same time as children, as well as being aware of the curriculum content.

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DAVID JIANG, STAFF, REPRESENTATIVE ALYSE GALVIN, asked if he should do the presentation or sectional analysis first.

Co-Chair Foster asked Mr. Jiang to address the presentation.

Mr. Jiang introduced the PowerPoint presentation "HB 105: Mental Health Education," dated April 15, 2025 (copy on file). He continued to slide 2 and explained that HB 105 spearheaded the creation of statewide guidelines and best practices for Alaska school districts to implement mental health education, while taking into account the districts' unique needs. He continued to slide 3 and relayed that Alaska faced a growing mental health and suicide crisis. He discussed statistics published by the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority (AMHTA) which reported that Alaska's suicide rate had been nearly twice the national average for years. Among young adults aged 15 to 24, as shown on the graph, the suicide rate was three to four times the national average. He cited that death by suicide was the leading cause of death for Alaska's youth, surpassing accidents and homelessness.

Mr. Jiang referenced the 2023 Centers for Disease Control (CDC) Youth Risk Behavior Survey, in which 39.7 percent of high school students reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness nationwide, while 28.5 percent reported poor mental health. He cited that nearly 1 in 10 high schoolers attempted suicide in 2023 and continued that AMHTA cited depression as the most common contributing factor. Other mental health challenges increased the risk and often went undiagnosed and untreated. He asserted that statewide education was a key prevention strategy. He discussed the economic impacts and relayed that death by

suicide cost the country nearly \$70 billion annually in lifetime medical expenses and lost productivity. He stressed that addressing the crisis was a moral and economic necessity, and that early awareness and intervention were critical and would save lives.

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Mr. Jiang continued to slide 4 and noted that more states across the country were recognizing that mental health was equally as important as physical health. The slide showed a map that highlighted states that had implemented or encouraged mental health education in schools, with different colors showing different levels of commitment in terms of funding, materials, and encouragement. He pointed out the diversity of states on the map. He thought the map was a testament to the fact that poor youth mental health was a nationwide problem that underscored the importance of improving awareness.

Mr. Jiang continued to slide 5 and referenced Oklahoma's HB 1568, also called Maria's Law. The bill passed in 2021 with overwhelming support in both bodies, and mandated that the state Board of Education require that all schools to include mental health instruction into health education curriculum. The board would also provide a list of age-appropriate resources for K-12 students in collaboration with the Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services. He distinguished that while HB 1568 made mental health education a requirement, HB 105 proposed to provide encouragement and guidance, and was not a mandate. He relayed that he had a short video to show from one of the sponsors of the Oklahoma bill.

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Mr. Jiang played the video from Oklahoma State Senator John Haste discussing the rationale behind HB 1568. The Senator explained that the law was about drawing additional attention to mental health within schools and the need for training. He mentioned mental health issues kids were facing in school and mentioned "ACES" scores. He discussed a story of a girl who was assaulted by her father but did

not want to say anything because it was a small town. He discussed the work of removing the stigma of mental health, and the need for counseling work to help kids and adults work through the traumas associated with mental health.

Representative Galvin explained that "ACES" represented Adverse Childhood Experiences, and described a scale used by individuals in mental health and education that represented how many ACES an individual had.

Mr. Jiang continued on to slide 6 and discussed aspects of HB 105. The bill directed the Board of Education and Early Development (DEED) to develop guidelines for mental health instruction in mental health in consultation with the Department of Health (DOH), the Department of Family and Community Services (DFCS), as well as various organizations. The non-binding guidelines allowed school districts to implement mental health programs tailored to each district's needs. He noted that the bill fully recognized parental authority and viewed parents as partners in the process.

Mr. Jiang continued that school districts would ensure transparency by giving parents at least two weeks' notice before a child would participate in a mental health class or program and would give parents an opportunity to review content. A parent could withdraw a child from any activity found to be objectionable. He summarized that the goal was to integrate mental health with other health topics already in statute. He posited that well-informed youth developed healthier habits and behaviors with lasting benefits. To ensure oversight, the legislature would receive a report of the new mental health guidelines and how the guidelines were developed.

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Mr. Jiang continued to slide 7 and explained that HB 105 was built with several key principles in mind. The bill sought to establish that mental health was equal in importance to physical health. The bill viewed parents, schools, and students as equal partners; and valued the input in shaping programs. An important goal of the bill was to reduce the shame in talking about mental health and encourage those affected to seek help and resources. There was a built-in accountability and review process.

Co-Chair Foster asked if Mr. Jiang could briefly walk through the sectional analysis.

Mr. Jiang reviewed the sectional analysis (copy on file):

Section 1 - Adds a new section to 14.03.016(a) Legislative Intent: It is the intent of the legislature that the Board of Education and Early Development develop guidelines for instruction in mental health in consultation with the Department of Health, the Department of Family and Community Services, regional tribal health organizations, and representatives of national and state mental health organizations.

Section 2 - Adds a new subsection to 14.03.016(a) - A parent's right to direct the education of the parent's child. (7) Provides for notification of parents or guardians no less than two weeks before a class or program may provide mental health instruction to a child.

Section 3 - Amends AS 14.30.360(a) - Health education curriculum; physical activity guidelines. Amended to add mental health to the K-12 health education curriculum, placing mental and physical health on equal footing.

Section 4 - Amends AS 14.30.360(b) - Health education curriculum; physical activity guidelines. Amended to include board establishment of guidelines for developmentally appropriate instruction in mental health. In developing these developmentally appropriate guidelines, the State Board shall consult with the Department of Health (DOH), the Department of Family and Community Services (DFCS), regional tribal health organizations, and national and state mental health organizations.

Section 5 - Adds a new section to AS 14.30.360(b), Report to the Legislature: Two years after the effective date of this Act, the State Board of Education and Early Development shall submit a report to the Senate and House and notify the legislature that the report is available. The report must: (1) include a copy of the guidelines for developmentally appropriate instruction in mental health developed by

the Board as required under AS 14.30.360(b), as amended by Section 4 of this Act; and (2) describe the process the Board used to develop the guidelines.

Section 6 - Adds a new section to AS 14.30.360(b), Transition: The State Board of Education and Early Development shall develop the mental health guidelines required by AS 14.30.360(b), as amended by Section 4 of this Act, within two years after the effective date of this Act.

Co-Chair Foster relayed that the committee would hear invited testimony.

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JAMES BIELA, AMERICAN FOUNDATION FOR SUICIDE PREVENTION, ALASKA CHAPTER, BETHEL (via teleconference), spoke in support of HB 105. He relayed that his organization championed policies that supported the wellbeing of Alaskan children and families, which included giving tools to schools to incorporate mental wellness into health curriculum. He discussed his experience as an itinerant school social worker for remote villages, and the emotional struggles that deeply impacted more than just emotional wellbeing of students. He mentioned the effect on student academic performance, relationships, and the ability to engage and thrive in school.

Mr. Biela stressed the need for mental health education for young people to be able to identify their experiences. He mentioned mental health stigma. He discussed the bill, which he thought provided students with the tools to recognize distress. He referenced research that such programs could improve academic outcomes. He cited that in 2023, 21 percent of Alaskan high school students had planned a suicide attempt in the previous year. He stressed the importance of supporting students for the well-being of future generations.

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RUTH BILLY, SELF, PANUAK (via teleconference), spoke in support of the bill. She emphasized the importance of the bill. She thought mental health impacted everyone. She discussed watching her fellow students struggle and not having the words to explain what was going on. She

emphasized that mental health was as important as physical health, and that mental health education could save lives.

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ANN RINGSTAD, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, NATIONAL ALLIANCE ON MENTAL ILLNESS ALASKA, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), spoke in favor of the bill. She explained that National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI)- Alaska was one of 48 statewide organizations under the umbrella of NAMI, and its mission was to end the stigma of mental illness. She considered that the legislation had been vetted over the previous 5 years by past legislatures. She cited that one in six youth had a mental health condition like anxiety or depression, yet only half received services. Many mental health conditions occurred in youth and young adults, with 50 percent of all conditions beginning by age 14 and 75 percent by age 24.

Ms. Ringstad cited that in Alaska 62.9 percent of people aged 12 to 17 with depression had not received care the previous year, and suicide was the leading cause of death between the ages of 10 and 34. She argued that untreated mental illness could lead to high rates of school dropout, unemployment, arrest, incarceration, and early death. She discussed the advantages of early treatment, including lower cost and better outcomes. She thought educators and staff were often the first to recognize issues and emphasized the important role of schools. She emphasized that the majority of conditions had onset during youth and young adulthood. She stressed the importance of identifying mental challenges at a young age.

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KELLY MANNING, DEPUTY DIRECTOR, DIVISION OF INNOVATION AND EDUCATION EXCELLENCE, DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT, JUNEAU (via teleconference), reviewed the fiscal note from DEED with OMB component 2796 with control code xDsKJ.

Co-Chair Foster asked Ms. Manning if she was addressing the fiscal note with the publish date of March 26.

Ms. Manning answered "yes." She relayed that the fiscal note related to components for convening a working group to identify health education guidelines. There were three key

sections to the fiscal note, which included \$120,000 for 30 committee members to travel two times. There was a cost of \$2,000 per participant. The funding would allow for a group to convene and start the work. The group would meet remotely then convene in person to finalize the work. In addition, there was funding for one-time services for a facilitator to oversee the implementation, and professional development for educators. There was \$6,000 for legal fees to implement the regulation changes.

Ms. Manning continued that there would be a \$2,000 stipend provided to committee members with a \$60,000 component. The group would include individuals from DOH, DFCS, and national and state health organizations. The facilitator would support the work of the committee as well as work with the department on development of the required report.

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DR. KRISTY BECKER, CHIEF OF CLINICAL SERVICES, ALASKA PSYCHIATRIC INSTITUTE, ANCHORAGE (via teleconference), reviewed a zero fiscal note with OMB component 3311 from the Department of Family and Community Services with control code tvZUC. She understood that there was no financial burden attached to the fiscal notes and any assistance the Alaska Psychiatric Institute (API) could give in creating the curricula under HB 105 could be done in the course of its regular duties with its subject matter experts being made available to assist with the development.

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ANDREA MUECA, DEPUTY DIRECTOR, DIVISION OF BEHAVIORAL HEALTH, DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, reviewed a fiscal note from Department of Health with OMB component 3098 and with control code gpzUR. She referenced the bill. The fiscal note reflected the Division of Behavioral Health's anticipation that the bill would be "low impact." While there would be a slight increase in workload due to consultation and assistance in development of the mental health curriculum guidelines, the work was anticipated to be limited to specific requests from the board, and the result was a zero fiscal note.

Representative Hannan asked about Section 4, page 3 of the bill, which added new language. Existing statute that

started on line 10 iterated that that "a school health education specialist position will be established and funded at the department to coordinate the program statewide." She asked if the sentence referenced the existing personal safety guidelines related to Erin's Law [a bill signed into law in 2015 that required school districts to provide age-appropriate child sexual assault, teen dating, and youth suicide prevention curricula to all students.] She asked if the school health education position was within DEED or in DFCS. She assumed that everywhere the word "health" was used, words had been inserted to add "and mental," because previously the language related to physical health. She asked if line 10 would be changed to make the school health education specialist for both physical and mental health, and whether it was an already existing position.

Representative Galvin deferred the question to the department.

Ms. Manning responded that the bill would expand the responsibility of the existing position that was housed in the department to include mental health.

Representative Hannan asked if Ms. Manning's interpretation was that the position would be the responsible party for overseeing the guidelines proposed in the bill and overseeing the districts' implementation, even if the words "mental and physical" were not inserted.

Ms. Manning responded in the affirmative.

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Representative Bynum asked if educational materials on mental health were already being done by DEED and the bill would just codify it into law. He asked if mental health education was happening at the individual school or district level by choice, or if it was not happening at all.

Representative Galvin responded that it varied. She pointed out that some school districts had more capacity and more expertise, and some had none. She knew that the Anchorage School District was doing many different things, while other school districts had no tools to start with. She relayed that the intent of the bill was to provide a

flexible tool that school boards could work with and choose to implement in some or all schools. She emphasized that the bill strove to provide a tool that was not top-heavy and was helpful for those to use with the ability to make it appropriate for each district.

Representative Bynum asked about the impact on smaller school districts. He noted that the bill language provided that the curriculum "shall be encouraged to initiate" rather than being mandatory. He understood that the bill would encourage (through DEED) that mental health education was an important aspect of what schools were trying to do.

Representative Galvin conveyed that the idea was to elevate the conversation, with the appreciation that the state understood that there's an issue to be addressed. Further, to bring together subject matter experts to come up with age appropriate and culturally appropriate curriculum to be implemented as the districts chose.

Representative Bynum asked about AS 14.33.62 relating to suicide awareness and prevention training. He asked about the relationship between the [existing and proposed] statutes.

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Representative Galvin relayed that the bill proposed a more comprehensive educational piece that was intended for K-12 education. The curriculum would include information on items including depression and anxiety. She acknowledged the challenge of suicide in the state. She thought it was important to think of mental health more holistically. She referenced that subject matter experts had indicated that the curriculum needed to be considered in terms of "whole child wellness," which included both physical and mental health, and which the bill intended to do. She did not think the proposed changes conflicted with the other statutes.

Representative Bynum did not think there was a conflict between the statutes he referenced. The suicide education requirement was to educate teachers, while the mental health curriculum was suggested. He had just wanted to know whether there was a link between the two, or how the two things would work together.

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Representative Galvin relayed that she had not done the research herself, but based on what Representative Bynum had stated, it sounded like the bill would complement existing statute nicely. She stressed the importance for young children to understand what it felt to be anxious and to be comfortable talking about mental health topics long before the point of suicidal ideation. It made sense to her that the same individuals that worked on the suicide education information would likely be in the group of 30 individuals that would work on the mental health education curriculum.

Representative Bynum referenced the two-week notification portion of the bill, and considered that other educational statutes that did not have such a provision. He asked for information on the thought process behind requiring the notification to parents.

Representative Galvin responded that the topic had been previously raised by other members that were concerned that there was not enough time for parents to be notified. She thought there had been an amendment that Senator Gray-Jackson was comfortable with. She furthered that Senator Gray-Jackson had found that sometimes there was content in the classroom that could be triggering. She reminded that the point was to grow more resilience in children and more parental discussion. She noted that the bill erred on the side of caution and greater communicativeness with families.

[2:58:47 PM](#)

Representative Bynum referenced a section of code in Section 3 that mentioned "sexual matters" and the two-week notification. He knew that in his school districts in Ketchikan, Wrangell, north Prince of Wales, and Metlakatla; tribal consultation was important and should be happening. He wondered if the bill language that included regional tribal health organizations was intended to fill the consultation component. He wondered if the committee had looked at other factors under the section to consider consultation for other items in the education statutes.

Representative Galvin replied that the point of the bill looked at making sure the experts and tribal health

entities were at the table. She noted that the state had 232 tribes. She pondered that school boards should be consulting with tribes in contemplating the content. She noted that the bill was not trying to solve every issue with the tribal and educational system, but personally she thought that schools would be far more successful if communities were engaged to prop up students. She thought attendance would rise and activities would be more engaged with for parents. She mentioned the business communities and faith-based communities. She reiterated the importance of removing the stigma and talking about mental health as something that was key in a child's development.

3:02:13 PM

Co-Chair Schrage asked about the mandate that two weeks' notice be given by school districts before providing mental health training. He asked if schools or individual teachers were already providing mental health education, and if the bill would require the districts or teachers to have a new notification requirement any time they would teach the content.

Representative Galvin knew there was work being done in some districts already but did not know the answer to Co-Chair Schrage's question. She thought there was required notification for sex education. She reiterated that the mental health content could be triggering. She assumed that any content related to mental health education meant that school districts were serving the two-week notice already but thought it might be a question for Legislative Legal Services.

Co-Chair Schrage thought he could follow up on the topic offline. He understood why some parents might be comforted by the two-week notification requirement but cautioned about unintended consequences.

Representative Galvin agreed to follow up on the topic offline, and to work with legal services and school districts.

3:04:42 PM

Representative Hannan relayed that she had taught psychology at the high school level for 18 years. She noted that she was not required to give parental notification of

curriculum content, but she had always required two parental signatures acknowledging the syllabus and providing explicit parental consent for certain content related to disorders and including suicidal ideation and addiction. She thought that because of the existing notification requirements related to human reproduction and sexual matters, most districts were used to having explicit content permission notifications.

Representative Hannan noted that staff had suicide awareness education and in Lower Kuskokwim School District (LKSD) and many other districts there was training for students. She mentioned peer helpers or student councils or student courts receiving training. Her only concern over the bill was that it would not be enough, and the legislature was not giving all the resources to the school districts to implement a full mental health curriculum along with the support services that should go with it. She supported building a model curriculum, as some districts did not have the resources to do so. She mentioned that kids in the state had a significant number of mental health issues and a lack of access to services. She noted that by default schools became the place where some services were available, and the state should use its fullest ability to help young Alaskans.

[3:08:36 PM](#)

Representative Tomaszewski considered the implementation and cost of the bill. He referenced the fiscal note that indicated there would be 30 committee members with travel, \$30,000 to hire a facilitator, \$6,000 for legal fees and \$60,000 for member stipends. He thought the sponsor statement had mentioned DEED, DOH, DFCS, regional tribal health organizations, and national and state mental health experts. He asked if the folks in the groups were volunteers.

Representative Galvin responded that the committee was the work and mission of the members, and the departments did the work as part of its mission. She continued that youth mental health was part of a shared mission and was seen as a primary focal point that would be part of the department's work. The departments would take in the costs that would be associated with the work. If consultants were brought in, the individuals would be paid. Many of those

coming in would participate as part of their ongoing scope of work.

Mr. Jiang added that there were 30 members because a standard DEED committee had 20 members, but the extra 10 members encompassed regional and tribal health organizations.

Representative Tomaszewski observed the travel and stipends for committee members on the fiscal note. He asked if anxiety on its own was considered a mental illness.

Representative Galvin was not an expert in mental health and hesitated to share her belief. She thought what mattered was that experts indicated it was important to understand the language of what people were feeling. She was not comfortable discussing diagnoses and reiterated that she was not a mental health expert.

[3:14:05 PM](#)

Representative Bynum relayed that he was "a math and science kind of guy," and could understand that teachers needed to get certified to teach different coursework. He asked about the expectations for teachers to be able to teach mental health items. He knew there were typically individuals with training in schools such as counselors. He asked if teachers would be teaching the curriculum in the bill.

Representative Galvin understood that the idea of the bill was to put together the curriculum, and the districts would decide who would be appropriate to teach what. She thought in general in most elementary schools, topics like good touch/bad touch were taught by the teacher and sometimes there were counselors involved. She thought it was important to recognize the differences between districts, including in resources.

[3:16:38 PM](#)

AT EASE

[3:16:46 PM](#)

RECONVENED

Co-Chair Foster set an amendment deadline for April 24, at 5pm for HB 101.

Co-Chair Foster reviewed the agenda for the following morning's meeting.

HB 105 was HEARD and HELD in committee for further consideration.

#

ADJOURNMENT

3:18:55 PM

The meeting was adjourned at 3:18 p.m.