



THE STATE  
of **ALASKA**  
GOVERNOR MIKE DUNLEAVY

## Department of Health and Social Services

ALASKA COMMISSION ON AGING

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March 21, 2019

Representative Geran Tarr  
Alaska State Capitol, Room 128  
Juneau, Alaska 99811-0001

Subject: ACoA Letter of Support, HB 22

Dear Representative Tarr:

The Alaska Commission on Aging (ACoA) is pleased to offer support for HB 22, to extend the "Statewide Suicide Prevention Council" to June 30, 2027. Alaska has one of the highest rates of suicide in the U.S., and among older Alaskans specifically, there is a high rate of suicide. According to 2017 data from the Alaska Bureau of Health Analytics and Vital Records, Alaska's age-adjusted suicide rate for people age 65+ is 27.3, twenty-five percent higher than the age-adjusted suicide rates for older Americans at 19.7. Nationally, elderly white men have the highest risk of suicide with a rate of 32 suicides per 100,000 each year, using firearms as the most common means to complete this act (National Institute of Mental Health, 2016). Although older adults attempt suicide less often than those in other age groups, they have a higher completion rate.

The higher rate of senior suicide in Alaska parallels the higher risk of suicide among younger Alaskans. While reasons for the higher rates of suicide among Alaskan seniors are not completely known, there is some evidence to suggest that colder, darker northern climates are more conducive to depression, which is one of the leading causes of suicide. Depression in older people often goes untreated as it may be more difficult for seniors to access behavior health care in many Alaskan communities while others view depression as a "normal part of aging." In addition, Alaskans age 65+ self-report higher rates of binge drinking, obesity, and frequent mental distress than seniors in the lower 48. These behavioral health conditions may contribute to depression and the higher rates of senior suicide in Alaska (Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey).

The Statewide Suicide Prevention Council created a Statewide Suicide Prevention Plan, 2018-2022 that is intended to be custom-fit to each community and group. Strategy 2.7 of the Suicide Prevention Plan recommends that senior service providers should become familiar with the warning signs of suicide as well as risk factors for suicide such as substance abuse, violence, and depression. Senior centers and other senior service settings offer a primary environment for seniors to address those conditions and feelings, as well as their feelings about suicide. Strategy 3.7 of that plan recommends the state and communities participate in efforts to de-stigmatize suicide and improve access to treatment in order to prevent mental health crises. Seniors do not always access behavioral health services that are provided in community settings and are more likely than younger individuals to live in isolation and choose not to seek help.

The Statewide Suicide Prevention Council is working towards breaking the silence and stigma surrounding the problem of suicide in Alaska that are contributing to suicide and preventing people from accessing the help they need. This work needs to continue to effect change and turn the curve in Alaska. The Commission supports the work of the Statewide Suicide Prevention Council and appreciates your leadership on HB 22.

Sincerely,



Gordon Glaser  
Chair, Alaska Commission on Aging

Sincerely,



Denise Daniello  
ACoA Executive Director