

Sponsor Statement for SB 198

Statewide Suicide Prevention Council

The greatest gift we can give is the gift of life.

Last Updated: April 24, 2001

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Suicide is preventable.

It is devastating to lose someone to suicide at any age, but it is especially tragic to lose a young person who has so much to live for. Suicide is a final cry of despair, and we need to hear that cry.

In 1999, the United States Surgeon General issued "A Call to Action" to prevent suicide. The report made 15 recommendations categorized in the areas of awareness, intervention and methodology. Hearing the cries and responding, Senate Bill 198 is another step in answering both the states and the national call to action.

SB 198 will establish a statewide suicide prevention council made up of fourteen private and public members representing rural and urban Alaska. Two members from both the House and Senate would sit on the council. The governor would appoint ten members, including experts in substance abuse and mental health, as well as people who have been directly impacted by suicide, and who work with youth across the state.

Suicide is an on-going epidemic in many parts of the state --- especially rural Alaska and the Matanuska-Susitna Valley --- and the numbers are at an all-time high. This is heart breaking. We all must work together to reduce the toll suicide is having on the people of our state.

The council will focus on finding ways to reduce suicide rates, broaden public awareness of the suicide warning signs, and enhance suicide prevention services and programs throughout the state. Each March the council will submit a report to the Legislature and the governor with its findings and recommendations.

A prior effort to study suicide in Alaska was initiated over twelve years ago when Senator Willie Hensley brought the issue to the forefront. The lives of Alaskans are still at risk.

Establishing this suicide prevention council has bi-partisan support in the Senate. I sincerely urge all members of the committee to join me in supporting SB 198 by offering a hand of support and lifting them from despair.

"Hope – the major weapon against the suicide impulse." Karl Menninger