

March 4, 2021

Representative Liz Snyder, Co-Chair
Representative Tiffany Zulkosky, Co-Chair
House Health and Social Services Committee
State Capitol
Juneau, AK 99801
Sent via email

RE: Executive Order 119

Dear Co-Chairs Snyder and Zulkosky,

The Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority (Trust) offers the following perspective on the proposal to bifurcate the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS), as outlined in Executive Order 119.

The Trust has a long history of working closely with DHSS on a variety of initiatives and projects that work to improve outcomes for Trust beneficiaries. While the Trust engages with many of the state's departments and agencies, DHSS is the executive branch department that has the biggest role in meeting the needs of Trust beneficiaries. Among its important duties, DHSS provides direct services, supports prevention and intervention activities, connects individuals and families to services, administers Alaska's essential Medicaid program, engages in policy making and public health education, delivers grant funding, and ensures access to safety net services.

The Governor has proposed splitting DHSS into the Department of Health and the Department of Family and Community Services to improve services to Alaskans. The Trust is certainly in favor of any changes to this or any department that will help the state better meet the needs of Trust beneficiaries: Alaskans who experience mental illness, substance use disorders, developmental disabilities, Alzheimer's disease and related dementia, and traumatic brain injuries. The Trust believes such changes should be advanced with the goal of improving the quality of and access to services, and not simply as a cost-savings measure.

The proposed bifurcation as outlined in EO119 is not expected to have a substantive impact on the Trust's work or functionality. We, with support from our counsel, have reviewed EO119 and do not have concerns with the proposed move of Trust statutes from DHSS's statute sections to the Department of Revenue (DOR) statutes - DOR is the department under which the Trust currently operates.

Many Trust partners that provide essential services and supports to Trust beneficiaries are posing important and fair questions about the proposed split. These questions include broader concerns about the process used to inform the public about the split, such as why there was not a robust engagement process that included Tribal health providers and other key stakeholders, and what data was used to determine that the

proposed re-organization is best for Alaska. We have also heard many more detailed concerns, such as how will continuity of essential services be ensured during a transition, how will the state ensure that “warm hand-offs” occur when both new departments are supporting an individual or family, and how the split will impact the final stages of the 1115 Medicaid waiver implementation and the work of the Administrative Services Organization.

We encourage DHSS to consider the questions that are arising, and to work directly with stakeholders to hear and respond to their concerns. In doing so, the state will be in a better position to address the many challenges that are inherent in a proposed action like splitting a department, whenever that change occurs. As an organization that regularly convenes a variety of organizations and perspectives in our work, we know that stakeholder input greatly improves the outcomes of any effort, particularly multi-faceted complex efforts such as this one.

We will be following the EO with interest as it continues through the legislative review process. If the reorganization is implemented as outlined in EO 119, the Trust looks forward to working with the new departments, their staff and community stakeholders to ensure services to beneficiaries are uninterrupted during the transition and the envisioned service improvements are realized.

Please let me know if the Trust can provide any further information. Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Sincerely,



Michael K. Abbott
CEO

Cc Adam Crum, Commissioner, Department of Health and Social Services
Bev Schoonover, Executive Director, Alaska Mental Health Board/Advisory Board on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse
Kristin Vandagriff, Executive Director, Governor’s Council on Disabilities and Special Education
Lisa Morley, Executive Director, Alaska Commission on Aging