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BETTER OPTIONS FOR ALASKANS IN CRISIS

ALASKA - Thanks to a bill that passed the Legislature this past session, Alaskans in crisis will no longer have to sit in hospital emergency rooms or, worse, jails, waiting for mental health evaluation and treatment. Instead, once the bill goes into operation, they'll be able to get short-term treatment at crisis stabilization centers, for up to 24 hours, and at crisis residential centers, for up to a week. Thanks to the Governor's signature on HB172, this harm can finally stop.

API, the place where many people have had mental health evaluations over the years, cut its capacity in 2018 and had to turn people away. They ended up waiting in hospital emergency rooms and jails. After Disability Law Center and the Public Defender Agency sued, Judge William F. Morse ordered the State to take responsibility for the people stuck in limbo. At the same time, the Mental Health Trust, the State, and the Court System were working on shifting short-term mental health treatment to the "Crisis Now" model, which has been adopted in Florida and Arizona. When the State suggested that Disability Law Center might be able to settle our lawsuit if the State agreed to Crisis Now, Disability Law Center attorneys attended Crisis Now presentations and quickly signed on to the idea. According to DLC Legal Director Mark Regan, "the settlement in our case directs the State to introduce Crisis Now legislation, which the State has done, and the State, the Trust, and Disability Law Center testified in favor of this legislation repeatedly in the 15 to 20 hearings that legislative committees had this year. In May, the bill passed the Senate 15-3 and the House 36-2."

As the bills went through the Legislature, everyone became aware of other problems with the civil commitment system. Next year, under the bill the Governor has signed, the Trust, the State, and others, including patients with lived experience, patient advocates and Disability Law Center, will collaborate on a report collecting information on how to report patient injuries and how to use grievance procedures, with suggestions for changing the laws to make the system work better.

Today, we celebrate the collaborative work of many legislators, agencies, groups and individuals who participated in this effort to ensure that vulnerable Alaskans would no longer be harmed because they were experiencing a mental health crisis. DLC looks forward to working with agencies, organizations, patients with lived experience and patient advocates on the report in an ongoing effort to better serve Alaskans in crisis.

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The Disability Law Center is an independent non-profit law firm designated as the State of Alaska's Protection and Advocacy System, providing legally based advocacy to people with disabilities statewide.