

Substance Misuse and Addiction

Expand treatment, reduce waitlists, and build an adequate workforce to serve Alaskans with substance use disorders

Substance misuse and addiction is a growing statewide problem that exists in both urban and rural areas, and across all socio-economic, ethnic, cultural, age, and disability groups. The consequences of addiction impacts individuals, families, friends, neighbors, and communities.

In 2019, the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority (Trust) estimated that nearly 40,000 Alaskan adults experience alcohol dependence or abuse, and 20,000 adults experience drug dependence or abuse. Also, an estimated 1,300 Alaskan youth (between ages 12-17 years) experience alcohol dependence or abuse.¹

What Are Impacts To Trust Beneficiaries?

Like all Alaskans, Trust beneficiaries² are impacted by substance misuse and addiction. When addiction is not addressed, negative health impacts and harms escalate, resulting in poorer life outcomes. People with disabilities can be more vulnerable to the progression of an addiction and generally have less access to healthcare and community supports, such as treatment, stable housing, and employment.

People with co-occurring disorders (a substance use disorder combined with another disability, such as mental illness or a developmental disability) often experience greater symptom severity that requires specialized interventions.³ Also, seniors and

individuals with disabilities, in particular, can experience over-prescription of certain medications for pain, including opioids that increases their vulnerability for substance dependence or addiction. Managing multiple prescriptions can be complicated, and if not managed properly there is increased risk of adverse consequences.

Alcohol misuse and dependence in Alaska has historically led, or been close to leading the nation per capita. The percent of adults who reported heavy drinking has increased over the last year and is currently 2.7% higher than national rates.⁴

Alaskan seniors age 65 and older consistently self-report higher rates of binge and heavy drinking than seniors in the lower 48,⁵ and Alaska's senior mortality rates for alcohol-induced and accidental deaths (non-fall related) are also higher.⁶

What are the Barriers to Treatment?

Trust beneficiaries experience greater barriers for accessing treatment, including lack of available treatment options, lack of insurance or funds to pay for services, long waitlists, not enough trained workforce, past criminal convictions, and lack of access to transportation, housing, and employment.

Behavioral health treatment providers report that resources have not kept pace with the actual costs associated with serving the growing number of Alaskans who need

addiction services. After 20+ years of flat-funding and state grant reductions for behavioral health services, providers have been facing an aging infrastructure, inability to recruit and retain treatment professionals, attrition of staff, and an increased demand from a statewide addiction epidemic.

What Programs and Services Work?

Alaskans with substance use disorders need a full continuum of care, from prevention and early intervention, to treatment and recovery services that increase the likelihood of long-term recovery.

Community-based services are less expensive than residential or institutional care and can be equally or more effective. These services can include, but are not limited to, substance use prevention, crisis stabilization, residential and outpatient treatment, detox services, Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT), peer support and reentry services, and long-term recovery supports.

How are Treatment Services Funded?

Substance use disorder treatment in Alaska is funded through a variety of means, including Medicaid reimbursement, private insurance, and state-funded grant dollars to community non-profit and for-profit providers.

State-funded *Behavioral Health Treatment*

and Recovery Grants pay for community emergency outpatient and residential treatment services to low-income youth and adults with moderate to severe behavioral health disorders.

During the 2019 legislative session, these grants were reduced by \$6.1 million with the intention that this reduction would be offset by savings resulting from implementation of the 1115 Behavioral Health Medicaid Waiver. However, these waiver services are gradually being implemented across the state and cost savings have not yet been realized.

Costs of Addiction in Alaska

According to a 2019 McDowell Group report on the economic costs of drug and alcohol misuse in Alaska, the estimated cost of addiction in 2018 was about \$3.5 billion. Of these costs, productivity losses accounted for the largest component.⁷

The misuse of alcohol and substances also has a wide range of intangible costs that include domestic violence, the suffering of victims, childhood trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), and diminished quality of life.

Substance misuse also plays a significant role in traffic collisions and crime, including driving under the influence, assault, theft, domestic violence and sexual assault.

The Trust and partner advisory boards support statewide efforts to expand access to treatment, reduce waitlists, and build a sustainable workforce to serve Alaskans with substance use disorders across the lifespan. ❖

¹ *Division of Public Health, DHSS 2018 Alaska Scorecard*. Retrieved from: http://dhss.alaska.gov/dph/HealthPlanning/Documents/scorecard/2018_MHT_Scorecard_full.pdf

² *Alaska Mental Health Trust beneficiaries include people with mental illness, substance use disorders (SUD), intellectual-developmental disabilities (IDD) including fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD), Alzheimer's disease and related dementia (ADRD), and traumatic brain injury (TBI).*

³ *From Department of Health & Social Services, Healthy Alaskans 2010 – Volume 1.*

⁴ *Division of Public Health, DHSS 2018 Alaska Scorecard*. Retrieved from http://dhss.alaska.gov/dph/HealthPlanning/Documents/scorecard/2018_MHT_Scorecard_full.pdf

⁵ *BRFSS, Alaska Division of Public Health, Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, July 2018.*

⁶ *Division of Public Health, Alaska Bureau of Health Analytics & Vital Records.*

⁷ *McDowell Group. (2020). "The Economic Costs of Drug Abuse in Alaska." 2019 Update. Juneau: McDowell Group.*

For more information, go to: www.alaskamentalhealthtrust.org/jointadvocacy