

Trust Beneficiary Listening Session Summary

Introduction:

The Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority hosted a Listening Session on Thursday, September 12th, 2024, to gather firsthand perspectives from beneficiaries and caregivers about their experiences with Alaska's system of care. The Trust aims to utilize this feedback to inform its focus areas and priority initiatives related to beneficiary services in the state.

Session Details:

- Beneficiaries and caregivers were invited to share their experiences seeking and receiving services.
- Participation options included in-person attendance at the Trust Authority Building and virtual participation via WebEx.
- A total of 10 individuals provided verbal comments, and another seven submitted written comments. Participants included psychiatric rights advocates and customers of beneficiary-serving organizations.
- Written comments were accepted until September 12th via email to info@mhtrust.org with "Listening Session" in the subject line.
- In addition to Trust staff and trustee attendance, several stakeholders were online, including the Lieutenant Governor, representatives from the Department of Health, the Department of Family and Community Services, the Alaska Behavioral Health Association, and several beneficiary-serving organizations.

Key Themes:

Systemic Issues: The Alaska mental health system faces significant challenges, including:

- **Mistreatment and Rights Violations:** Participants reported prior experiences of mistreatment, inadequate care, and violations of rights within psychiatric facilities.
- **Lack of Enforcement:** Concerns that laws intended to protect beneficiaries may not be consistently enforced.
- **Focus on Control:** One participant noted that the system prioritizes control over care, leading to negative patient experiences.
- **Detention in Emergency Rooms:** Participants noted that the ongoing practice of detaining mentally ill individuals in emergency rooms and jails due to a lack of available treatment is a significant area for concern.

Need for Reform: Participants called for substantial reforms, such as:

- **Improved Systems:** Standardized grievance processes, better staff training, improved facilities, and addressing the lack of services for individuals with autism and FASD.
- **Enforced Rights:** Stronger enforcement of existing laws to protect patient rights.
- **Alternative Approaches:** Exploring peer respite and open dialogue programs.

Positive Experiences: Numerous participants shared positive experiences, including:

- **Reunion with Families:** Individuals who received services from organizations funded by the Trust were able to reconnect with their families.
- **Second Chances:** Housing and support services provided by the Trust helped people achieve stability and rebuild their lives.
- **Community-Based Services:** Organizations like Polaris House and Alaska Youth and Family Network play a crucial role in supporting recovery and family reunification.

Mini-Grant Program: Participants discussed the mini-grant program and suggested improvements, such as:

- **Increased Funding:** To address rising costs, the amount of funding allocated to individual mini-grants should be increased.
- **Streamlined Application Process:** The application process for mini-grants should be simplified to make it more accessible to beneficiaries.

Trust's Role: The Trust was urged to advocate for systemic changes and continue supporting community-based services.