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Congressional Briefing  
Mental Health First Aid for Public Safety
Thank you for the opportunity to be here today and for your attention to and interest in this topic. I would also like to thank Senator Mark Begich for his tireless efforts to advance Mental Health First Aid in our state.

My name is Jill Ramsey and I live in Anchorage, Alaska. I have been working in the field of mental health for the last 26 years and have a Master’s Degree in Psychiatric Rehabilitation from UMDNJ-Rutgers. I am also a Master Trainer of suicide prevention and a nationally certified Mental Health First Aid Instructor. I currently work for the University of Alaska in the College of Health’s Workforce Development Initiative. For the past three years, I have worked almost exclusively to implement Mental Health First Aid in Alaska, to coordinate trainings and to make this resource accessible to our health care workforce and as many Alaskan communities as possible.

Problem/Need
Alaskans face ongoing provider shortages, fragmented systems of care, and many mental health, suicide, and substance related challenges. Quite often, it is the most expensive intervention that an uninformed community will access first. Our law enforcement and emergency service systems are constantly called to assist with an emerging or acute mental health or substance related crisis, particularly in rural settings (with even fewer resources) for interventions that may not actually warrant law enforcement involvement.
Our law enforcement officers cover huge territories with limited resources. They are tenacious and creative in the delivery of their duties as Alaska’s geographical challenges are tremendous. In terms of distance and expense, the Alaska Primary Care Association has estimated that the time and expense related to managing an emergency healthcare issue in remote Alaska is comparable to a resident of Washington D.C. flying to Paris, for healthcare. With Mental Health First Aid training our communities’ First Responders can deescalate and discern mental health and substance related crises and prevent the need for expensive professional emergency interventions and services, much of which are not available or easily accessible. Our Law Enforcement professionals and volunteers are
asking for support and assistance in managing these crises within their own communities. We believe MHFA is the best response to their request.

**MHFA**

For Alaska, MHFA is an extraordinarily cost effective tool to equip our communities to recognize signs of a developing crisis and skills to address it early and effectively.

This time next year I hope to share with you the hard data our research team is collecting and analyzing in our rural communities, though we already know some of the impact. Rural Alaskan communities in which we have begun to saturate with MHFA training are evidencing a reduction in the use of emergency services, number of arrests, calls to law enforcement, and in some areas, a reduction in the incidence of suicide. Our research will tell us more but the effect seems to be related to demystifying mental health problems and breaking the barriers of stigma to allow compassion, support, and assistance for emerging problems at the outset, rather than intervening only at the point of full blown crises. The overall effect indicates less criminalization of symptoms and behaviors (which we feel is a direct result of MHFA training), less arrests, and more treatment referrals, DEESCALATING techniques that prevent violence, and discerning the difference between a symptom of an illness and criminal or deliberate belligerence.

**The Stories**

Police officers who have had the training have reported a difference in the outcome of interventions with people experiencing delusions and were able to refer people to the health clinics rather than engaging the person in a fruitless argument over delusional content that would have typically escalated to violence or aggression. As a result, the Anchorage Police Department has asked to have MHFA incorporated in its Police Training Academy making MHFA mandatory of all officers. The stories are adding up and we can safely predict that the more this training becomes available to law enforcement and other first responders, the more success stories we will hear.

Alaska sees the tremendous value MHFA training can have on our communities for the future – and the importance of training law enforcement and other first responders,
though we also believe we must also train the community in general to achieve the maximum effect. MHFA is already saving lives and saving money in Alaska while educating communities in a way that ensures compassion and safety for our citizens.

The research I have mentioned as well as the accumulating stories of resolved or averted crises illustrate why Congress was on the right track with appropriating $15 million for Mental Health First Aid training in 2014 – and why with additional funding to reach additional audiences, we can expand the impact of this lifesaving program in areas where it is most needed. I encourage you to support Senator Begich and Senator Ayotte’s bipartisan Mental Health First Aid Act, a bill that would do just that.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak today.
Biography

Jill Ramsey is the Behavioral Health Training Coordinator and an Adjunct Professor in the Center for Human Development of the College of Health at the University of Alaska. She holds an MS degree in Psychiatric Rehabilitation from UMDNJ-Rutgers and has worked in the mental health field for 26 years. Originally from New Mexico, Ms. Ramsey has lived and worked in Alaska for the past 15 years and has education and experience in health services management as well as direct services to adults experiencing serious mental illness, co-occurring disorders, substance disorders, developmental disabilities, and homelessness. Ms. Ramsey is a nationally certified instructor of Mental Health First Aid, Non Violent Physical Crisis Intervention, a Master Trainer in QPR Suicide Prevention, and a certified instructor of NAMI Connect’s Postvention Suicide Prevention training and is currently Alaska’s statewide coordinator for the implementation and expansion of Mental Health First Aid.