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OP-ED

Small Wins Make Big Impacts at Alaska Psychiatric Institute

*By Kim Kovol, Commissioner,
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The Alaska Psychiatric Institute (API), an 80-bed psychiatric hospital located in Anchorage is operated by the Department of Family and Community Services, and stands as Alaska’s sole state-run facility for psychiatric care.

Serving Alaskans at their most vulnerable, most of the work done at API never gets made public due to patient confidentiality requirements. However, API staff takes time to acknowledge and celebrate wins within the institute. Even the smallest of steps is a step toward recovery.

Rebecca Morrissey, a registered nurse at API since 2016, makes sure to take time to celebrate her colleagues, whose passion and skill in psychiatric care can make major differences for the patients they serve.

“I am in constant awe of the dedication of our front-line workers who are unable to share success stories because of patient confidentiality,” said Morrissey of the work that happens every day at API. “I have witnessed staff heal people where there was little hope that recovery was possible, and watched staff’s ability to see through the symptoms of mental health disorders into who the individual is and draw that out. It is remarkable.”



Morrissey has personally worked with patients at API and experienced her own quiet wins despite the challenges.

“Sometimes it can feel like patients aren’t progressing because of the severity of their mental health symptoms, she said. “I distinctly remember celebrating when a patient said my name for the first time.”

The patients API serve require assistance with a vast and diverse array of mental health challenges.

“There is not an average patient, each is a unique individual with unique needs,” Morrissey said. “We have the privilege of caring for patients with varying mental health disorders that include, but are not limited to, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, major depressive disorder, borderline personality disorder, and drug-induced disorders.”

To meet the needs of these patients, API takes a multifaceted approach to care, with patients receiving care across multiple disciplines that include psychiatric providers, nurses, medical providers, psychiatric nurse assistants, occupational and recreational therapy, psychology, and social work.

Morrissey’s commitment to psychiatric nursing is deeply personal. Her father, a psychiatric nurse assistant at API for 30 years, normalized mental health disorders for her from a young age. While her passion for mental health is rooted in her family, Morrissey’s continued dedication to API is fueled

by the patients themselves.

“Psychiatric nursing is specialized care,” said Morrissey, “and it takes a belief that people can and do recover, everyone deserves care, and there are no lost causes.”

Morrissey’s family legacy and undaunting pursuit of patient welfare earned her the recognition of Gov. Mike Dunleavy during his 2023 State of the State Address.

“Rebecca is a second-generation psychiatric nurse at API,” said Dunleavy. “She’s seen the darkest days at Alaska Psychiatric Institute, and she’s also seen the exponential turnaround in the past four years. Through her dedicated work and the work of so many others, API is now providing the services Alaskans expect us to deliver.”

Under the Dunleavy Administration, API has seen improvements such as a bed capacity increase from 20 to 80, the reopening of the Chilkat adolescent unit, the reduction of patient-on-staff assaults by as much as 80%, and the development of two new criminal forensic restoration programs.

Thanks to the tireless efforts and unwavering optimism of staff, work at API makes a significant difference for Alaskans in need.

For more information about Alaska Psychiatric Institute, visit dfcs.alaska.gov/api.

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