Maxine Duncan’s Statement

I want to start by saying this is hard to talk about — not because the facts are unclear, but because the response to them was.

When a student reports sexual assault, the expectation is not perfection — it’s protection. Schools are not courts. A student should never have to prove an assault “enough” before basic safety and support are offered.

What my daughter experienced was the opposite. There was obvious disbelief toward a sexual assault victim. The dorm principal whose role was not law enforcement was placed in the position of interviewing and effectively investigating a serious crime. At one point, we were told there was now “enough evidence” to place the assailant at the scene — as if protection only becomes appropriate after a threshold of proof is met.

That is not how student safety is supposed to work. Supportive measures are meant to come first, precisely because investigations take time and because students deserve access to education without fear or retraumatization.

Our very first interaction with the school set the tone. When we initially reached out seeking help for our daughter, we were told by the assistant dorm principal the accused student was “innocent until proven guilty.” That framing made it immediately clear where the school’s focus was — and it was not on my daughter’s safety or well-being.

In her case, the assailant was eventually sent home — three and a half weeks later. As sloppy and harmful as the handling was, that single action can be enough, legally, for a school to claim it responded and remain protected from accountability.

What followed was another month of uncertainty. The possibility that the decision could be appealed left our daughter wondering whether the assailant could return, whether the decision would stand, and whether she would again be expected to live and learn in an environment where she had already been met with disbelief and hostility. After the assailant left the administration treated our daughter as though she were the problem in the assault. Rather than being met with neutrality or care, she experienced ongoing hostility from authority figures. One administrator would stare her down in common spaces. The school principal reprimanded our daughter for wearing a crop-style top, even though that clothing was not prohibited under the school handbook at the time. That interaction made it clear that she was being scrutinized rather than supported after reporting harm.

As a result of that incident, we requested that the school principal not interact directly with her going forward, and that any necessary communication be handled through the vice principal instead. These were not isolated moments. Together, they communicated that reporting assault resulted not in protection, but in scrutiny, discomfort, and isolation.

We consulted with more than a dozen attorneys. Nearly all told us the same thing: cases like this are extraordinarily difficult — if not impossible — to win in court, especially in Alaska. Not because the harm isn’t real, and not because the response wasn’t flawed, but because the law heavily protects their state-run school.

We were also told that there are cases involving even more severe harm — cases worse than our daughters — where courts still ruled in favor of the school. The legal standard is often not whether a school handled something well, but whether it did something that can be framed as an effort, even if that effort was delayed, inadequate, or harmful.

What's often lost in discussions about policy and procedure is the human cost. Watching our daughter relive her trauma — especially as the anniversary of the assault passed — has been devastating. Each delay, each moment of disbelief, forced her to re-enter an experience she never chose and had already survived once.

This pattern didn't stop at the school. When she, as an adult, sought records and information from the city related to her own case, she encountered similar resistance — shifting explanations, procedural barriers that didn't align with the law, and an overall posture that felt more focused on limiting access than on transparency.

It also became apparent that the Assembly had been instructed not to engage. With one exception, there was no response. One Assembly member, Katie Riley did reach out and expressed a willingness to see what could be done, but that follow-up never came.

The result so far has been that the City's narrative has largely gone unchallenged. Whether through institutional deference or internal guidance, the lack of engagement has shaped the process up to this point. That is precisely where due diligence matters.

Taken together, these experiences reinforced a troubling pattern: when systems are asked to respond to sexual violence, the priority too often becomes protecting the institution rather than supporting the person who was harmed.

We are not accusing — we are describing what our daughter experienced. What stands out is not a single decision, but a pattern of resistance to accountability and transparency. When multiple systems respond this way, it raises serious concern about how survivors are treated once a report enters official channels.

From the City administration, we expect adherence to civil rights law, transparency, and a commitment to serving the public. Decisions and guidance coming from the Municipal Administrator's office shape how the City operates, and when statutory requirements become subject to ad hoc interpretation rather than consistent application, public trust is affected.

From the Assembly, we are asking for due diligence. Oversight bodies exist to ask questions, examine patterns, and ensure that government conduct reflects both legal obligations and community values.

What we want from the school is not punishment or retaliation. We are asking for accountability and change — acknowledgment that the response caused harm, examination of why authority figures were allowed to treat a victim with disbelief and hostility, and safeguards so that no other student is put in the position our daughter was placed in.

This is bigger than our family. In Alaska, state-run institutions are often legally shielded even when serious harm occurs. When accountability is limited, families are often left with only one option — to speak publicly, not to attack, but to prevent repetition.

We are speaking out because protections only matter if they are honored — and because no young adult's first experience asserting her rights should ever be met with resistance, disbelief, and harm.