

To: Fellow AAS members/colleagues

From: The undersigned past-presidents of AAS

Date: 16 August, 2021

As most of you probably know, over the past several months there has been a lot of upheaval and concerning changes occurring at AAS, with very little information being communicated to the membership. And unfortunately, the suicidology listserv, where previously we would have shared this kind of information, appears to be censoring any discussion about these sudden unexplained actions at AAS.

As Past Presidents of AAS, we have an aggregate of 275 years (ranging from 18 to 50 years) of membership in the association. AAS has been our professional family. Our longevity as members and our past leadership of AAS attest to our long-standing loyalty and commitment to the mission of the organization. Because of this standing, many of us have been contacted by AAS members looking for information about what is happening at AAS. In response, we have pooled our resources and contacts to pull together as much information as we can to help the AAS membership better understand these drastic changes and why they have occurred.

Below we have listed the many facts we have gathered. We are united in our belief that association business should occur in the sunlight, not in the dark shadows or back rooms, where many of these actions appear to have taken place. Based on the information we have gathered, we are demanding that Board Chair, Tony Wood, resign. At the end of this letter, we will make clear our intent if he does not and our "ask" of you.

This is what we have learned:

1. Under Tony Wood's leadership, more than a dozen board members have resigned their board membership.
  - a. Among these resignations are three presidents-elect or presidents of the association, all chosen by you to represent you.
  - b. One of these resignations occurred, in part, because Tony Wood resisted this president's insistence that he (Tony) follow California non-profit law (AAS is incorporated in California).
2. In a span of just a single week at the end of July, eight (8) board members tendered their resignations.
  - a. Among these eight were five Division Chairs representing clinicians, researchers, students, crisis services, and loss survivors; and your current president-elect.
3. A few resigned board positions have been left vacant for some months with no apparent efforts made to replace them or hold elections to do so. One of these board positions, that of a past-president, has gone vacant since April. This position has been under consideration by the board as potentially "not needed," hence to be removed from a revised set of by-laws that has been in development since 2019, but exists under the current set of organization by-laws meant to

control current board actions. Concurrently, other non-elected member appointments to the Board have been made by Tony Wood.

4. In response to these resignations, the remaining seven board members, including Tony Wood, have hired a crisis communications firm, at the expense of the association, which to this date (now weeks later) has communicated not a single word to the membership about these resignations and the reasons for them.
5. Board members who have resigned have been warned from communicating to the membership “under threat of legal action” and/or being sued for “personal actionable injury.”
  - a. We have been informed by an attorney that there is no legal support for the concept that *former* board members cannot talk to -- or express their opinions to -- anyone, inclusive of AAS members.
6. There is a significant concern of a conflict of interest between Tony Wood and an executive Committee (EC) member who lives with him. This relationship should have been disclosed to all board members, particularly in light of divisive board votes. It was not. In addition, this relationship concentrated voting power in an EC already diminished in size by the resignations of two of its seven members.
7. In violation of more than 50 years of association practice and the intent of the By-laws, the EC, under the leadership of Tony Wood, terminated the Association’s Executive Director, Colleen Creighton, without consulting with the full Board of Directors *at a time when nothing prevented that consultation from occurring*. We do not argue with the **board’s** right to terminate the executive director, but are of the opinion that this action was taken by the EC outside the explicit intent of the by-laws, as follows:
  - a. AAS’s By-laws clearly state (**Bolded highlights** are ours):
    - i. Article VI, Section 2: The **Board of Directors shall employ an Executive Director** who shall be **under the supervision of the Board of Directors and the EC**.
    - ii. Article VI, Section 2: During intervals between meetings of the Board of Directors, the Executive Committee shall act on behalf of the Board **when time does not permit full consultation with all Board members**.
    - iii. Article V. Section 1. **The Board** will hire and annually appraise the Executive Director.

It is evident that the EC, under Tony Wood’s leadership, failed to involve the full board in this decision.

8. Further, Article VII, Section 2F states: The Executive Director shall be evaluated annually by the EC. In the four years of her tenure as Executive director, Colleen Creighton has only been evaluated twice by the EC, both times in 2019. The first evaluation conducted in mid-2019 covered the period of May 2017 to April 2019; at this she received ratings of “good” or “excellent” in 7 out of 8 categories of evaluation. At the second evaluation, conducted at the end of 2019 and intended to cover the period April 2019 to December 2019, to now place the evaluation on a calendar year basis, she received ratings of good to excellent in all categories. Her performance was neither evaluated in 2020, nor until she was dismissed in mid-2021. It is evident from the above that the EC, under the chairmanship of Tony Wood, failed to meet its

responsibility as overseer of the Executive Director, failed to share with the full board their concerns about the Executive Director's performance and failed to share with the full board a reasonable rationale for their decision to terminate her.

9. Yet, over the four years of her employment by AAS and in spite of her repeated attempts to secure one, Colleen Creighton was never afforded an employment contract or agreement by the EC.

- a. Lanny Berman, who served as Executive Director for almost twenty years was both evaluated annually and offered an employment agreement by the EC annually.

10. We understand that the reason given by the EC for this termination was that the executive director "was not a good fit for the association" and/or that "we are heading in a new direction." We further understand that this alleged "new direction" for the association was not -- and has not been-- discussed/shared with and/or by the Board of Directors. Nor has it been communicated to the members of AAS.

11. AAS hired a consultant to facilitate strategic planning for the organization. The person hired produced a report to the Board that, among other items, made very clear that there were significant problems in the Association's "governance." Abstracted from strategic planning documents are the following, as examples of AAS's governance under the leadership of Tony Wood:

- b. "AAS...has potential for significant growth but challenges in governance and accountability...limit its impact and progress."
- c. "AAS Board and staff overwhelmingly cite governance challenges as AAS's top limiting factor."
- d. "The poor systems result in perceptions of backroom dealing, opaque decision-making, mistrust of intentions, and heightened anxiety, all of which undermine the board's ability to function appropriately."

12. A week ago a request was made by one of us to Tony Wood to produce copies of all board and EC meeting minutes for the past 12 months, a request specifically allowed any member of a not-for-profit membership organization by California Corporation Codes 6333 and 8333<sup>1</sup>. To date, he has ignored this request.

### **What Are We Intending to DO?**

In late July, as past presidents, we asked Tony Wood to resign for the good of the association. He ignored this request.

Given the above, which we understand to be true, we again are demanding that he accept responsibility for the problems listed above and to provide the association with a new beginning by resigning his position as chair of the board.

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<sup>1</sup> AAS was incorporated as a California not-for-profit organization upon its founding in 1968.

Should he continue to ignore this request, and in the belief that we can no longer support our beloved organization as it is now being led, we intend to resign our memberships in AAS as of the end of August and to no longer attend the annual conferences.

### **What Are We Asking You to Do?**

First, we ask that you examine your conscience and decide for yourself what you consider to be your best course of action given the above.

Second, we ask that you join with us by:

- a. Sending a note under your name to [leadership@suicidology.org](mailto:leadership@suicidology.org), similarly asking for Tony Wood's resignation and an immediate effort by the board to fill the elected positions currently vacant on the board of directors.
- b. Should you feel as we do, consider whether you, too, can and will maintain or resign your membership in AAS; if the latter, to do so as of the end of this month should Tony Wood not resign.

Third, we ask that you further disseminate this letter to colleagues and others you know to be members of AAS in order to maximally share this information via email, social media, or whatever other communication channel available. Because attachments cannot be included in most social media posts the letter has been posted on-line at <https://www.speakingofsuicide.com/2021/08/16/american-association-of-suicidology/>.

Lastly, let us be as clear as possible. We very much wish AAS to survive and thrive and for us to maintain our relationship to and support of it and its mission. We simply cannot do so given what in our collective opinion is the destructive impact of Tony Wood's leadership. We greatly value the volunteer time that the board of directors puts in on all our behalf, but that board needs ethical and transparent leadership.

We thank you for reading this and for doing the life-saving work that you do.

Respectfully submitted by,

Lanny Berman, Ph.D.    Frank Campbell, Ph.D.    Dave Jobes, Ph.D.    Pete Gutierrez, Ph.D.

Cheryl King, Ph.D.    John McIntosh, Ph.D.    M. David Rudd, Ph.D.    Bill Schmitz, Ph.D.