

2020

# ALASKA ADOLESCENT HEALTH TRIBAL ACTION PLAN

A strategic plan for promoting the health and wellness of Alaska Native Youth



ALASKA NATIVE  
TRIBAL HEALTH  
CONSORTIUM

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## Action Planning Purpose

The Alaska Adolescent Health Tribal Action Plan intention is to be a living document for the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (ANTHC), Alaska Native Tribes and Health Organizations as well as collaborating agencies in our tribal communities to:

- Guide program planning
- Support grant applications
- Serve as a foundation for community outreach efforts
- Foster a holistic response to promoting the health and wellbeing of Alaska Native/American Indian (AN/AI) adolescents and youth

## Action Planning Background

The Alaska Adolescent Health Tribal Action Plan is the product of a collaborative meeting entitled Working Together to Create Healthier Communities for Native Youth: An Action Planning Session. The action planning session was initiated by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health Region X and the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (ANTHC). Forty Tribal health planners, coordinators, prevention advocates, Elders and community partners from across Alaska came together for a one-day facilitated action planning meeting to improve Alaska Native/American Indian (AN/AI) adolescent health on April 23, 2019 in Anchorage, Alaska. A special thanks also to the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco for providing a meeting space and catering at the Anchorage Field Office of the US Department of Housing and Urban Development.

The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health Region X staff facilitated the compilation of all notes and transcripts into a meeting summary and subsequently shared them with all participants, including tribal health representatives, community representatives, behavioral specialists, and other members of participating organizations. This action plan is based on this meeting summary and synthesizes all input, feedback and discussions.

The action planning process included participants representing eight regions of the Alaska Native Health System (see Figure 1):

**Figure 1: Alaska Health System Map**



## Alaska Adolescent Health Background

Certain behaviors adversely affect the health, wellbeing and positive development of adolescents such as (10):

- Behaviors that result in unintentional and intentional injury (i.e. suicidal behavior and violence)
- Substance misuse (including alcohol and other drugs as well as tobacco, e-cigarettes and vaping)
- Unsafe sexual activity resulting in unintended pregnancy, HIV infection and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs)
- Unhealthy diet or poor access for nutritious foods
- Inadequate physical activity

Many of these behaviors are interrelated, and thus we recognize the role of shared risk and protective factors in promoting adolescent health and ensuring that adolescents achieve their full potential.

### Adolescent Health Data

The majority of adolescent-specific health data regarding these behaviors are available through the Alaska Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey (YRBS), a school-based survey of Alaska high school students grades 9-12 (2). The State of Alaska collects YRBS information to better understand and meet the needs of Alaskan teens. High school students in public traditional, alternative and juvenile justice and correctional high schools take the YRBS every other year in odd-numbered years. Participation requires written parental consent and is voluntary and anonymous. The YRBS Dashboard allows users to download data by year and by race and ethnicity. The School Climate and Connectedness Survey through the Association of Alaska School Boards is a voluntary statewide survey of students grades 6-12 (3).

## SHARED RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

A shared risk and protective factor approach involves prioritizing the factors linked to unhealthy youth behavior in prevention planning, partnership and programmatic efforts, as an alternative to focusing on a single behavior. This approach allows state and community agencies to streamline prevention approaches and services. Breaking down the traditional health “siloes” and moving toward a shared factor approach can provide more effective coordination between partners and leverage resources (1).



### Decreasing Risk Factors

Risk factors are characteristics within the individual or conditions in the family, school, community and society that increase the likelihood that someone will engage in unhealthy, problematic behavior. The more risk factors present in an adolescent’s life, the greater the likelihood that problems will emerge (4).

Many risk behaviors among adolescents are interrelated. Drug and alcohol use can affect both violent behavior and sexual activity, for example. **It is thus imperative that we develop cross-cutting strategies to promote healthy behavior among Native youth, by exploring community and environmental conditions that impact health, as well as individual factors that make unhealthy behavior seem attractive.**

**NOTE:** Protective factors are the result of intentional actions; the absence of a risk factor does not automatically convey protection.



## Increasing Protective Factors

Protective factors are characteristics within the individual or conditions in the family, school, community and society that are instrumental in healthy development; they build supportive relationships, social competence and resiliency. Resiliency is the process of successfully adapting and recovering from stressful events or crises. When adolescents can effectively negotiate problems and manage their risk factors, they are less likely to engage in unhealthy, problematic behavior (4).

It is well recognized that many factors, conditions, and circumstances impact young people's health and development. Although the health sector plays a significant role in health promotion, prevention and care, other sectors – like education and social welfare—also influence the health and development of adolescents.

Because adolescents and young adult's brains and bodies are still developing, they are particularly sensitive to social and environmental influences. Adolescent behaviors are particularly influenced by:

- Parents and families
- Adversity and Intergenerational Trauma
- Health care systems
- Peers
- Media
- Communities, villages, and tribes
- Schools
- Social norms
- Community organizations
- Government, policies, and laws
- Faith-based communities



These factors affect young people's capacity to withstand life stressors and their ability to make decisions about healthy behavior. Strategies designed to grow young people's resiliency via one or more of these change agents can be highly effective in advancing the health and well-being of young people.

Research and practice has identified several environmental and social factors that help young people overcome adversity. These include:

- Strong family support
- Connection to Culture
- Cognitive and Social-Emotional Competence
- Knowledge of Adolescent Development
- Caring and trusted adults
- Positive peer groups
- Strong sense of self and self-esteem
- Engagement in school and community

**NOTE:** Protective factors are the result of intentional actions; the absence of a risk factor does not automatically convey protection.



## Guiding Principles for Adolescent Health Programming

Adolescent health provides a strong foundation for adult health. Some adolescents' unsafe choices or vulnerable situations can have high impact, long-term, and life-threatening consequences. Alternatively, when young people are supported by making positive choices, the benefits to the individual and community are significant, because many life-long patterns of behavior are established during adolescence. For these reasons, we recommend the following guiding principles for adolescent health programming (7).

|                               |   |
|-------------------------------|---|
| <b>HOLISTIC</b>               | Acknowledgment of the existence and the intersectionality of physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual health, and promote stability within each of these realms.   |
| <b>YOUTH-DRIVEN</b>           | Programs, services, and interventions aimed at adolescents are likely to positively influence adolescent health if they are developed with the involvement of young people. Because of this, a very wide range of youth from different regions and circumstances (urban, rural, off the road system, etc.) need to be included to understand “what youth need” to help ensure health and wellness services are sensitive to their diverse needs and concerns. |
| <b>CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE</b> | When designing culturally appropriate strategies to promote adolescent health, incorporate Alaska Native community norms, traditions, values, and beliefs and traditional teaching methods and learning styles.   |
| <b>PREVENTION FOCUSED</b>     | The leading causes of illness and death among adolescents are largely preventable (8) and young people’s behaviors are influenced at the individual, peer, family, school, community, and societal levels. Interventions need to acknowledge conditions, circumstances, and factors influencing the health and wellbeing of adolescents and young adults.   |
| <b>HONORING THE PAST</b>      | Through honoring the past, teaching traditions, and encouraging youth-elder engagement, young people will learn the values that will help them find the balance necessary of a healthy and happy life which will ultimately help sustain Alaska Native communities.   |



## The 5 Essentials for Healthy Adolescents

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (U.S. DHHS), Office of Adolescent Health believes that adolescents will be healthy and thriving young adults when they receive five essentials throughout their adolescence (9):

### 1. POSITIVE CONNECTIONS WITH SUPPORTIVE PEOPLE

Adolescents thrive in safe, stable, and nurturing relationships with supportive adults, whether those are parents, coaches, neighbors, grandparents, teachers, program leaders, or mentors. These types of connections are important for all teens and may be difficult for at-risk youth to find and sustain.

### 2. SAFE AND SECURE PLACES TO LIVE, LEARN, WORK, AND PLAY

Schools, neighbors, and community settings can foster and support healthy adolescent development across the spectrum, including physical and mental health, social interactions, and cognitive growth. Adolescents also benefit from safe space to congregate, enjoy social, athletic, and other recreational activities, and just be with their peers.

### 3. ACCESS TO HIGH-QUALITY, TEEN-FRIENDLY HEALTH SERVICES

Adolescents benefit from access to high-quality medical and dental care, mental and behavioral health services, and health care providers who understand adolescent health and development. Young patients prefer health services that are youth-friendly, culturally competent, affordable, convenient, and confidential. Health care that is adolescent-centered and involved parents, but allows for increased autonomy as adolescents reach their late teens is ideal.

### 4. OPPORTUNITIES TO ENGAGE AS LEARNERS, LEADERS, TEAM MEMBERS, AND WORKERS

Active youth involvement with people and programs is important for promoting healthy adolescent development. This includes activities at school at home, or in the community, such as school clubs, sports, music, visual and performing arts, or out-of-school time programs, volunteer or paid jobs, and activities at places of worship. Adolescents also benefit from opportunities to shape programs and activities, which can improve the program, provide valuable leadership skills, and build confidence.

### 5. COORDINATED ADOLESCENT AND FAMILY CENTERED ACTIVITIES

Adolescents enter health and social service systems in many ways and at different stages. Integrated and coordinated services can help ensure better health outcome and support healthy development for adolescents. Unfortunately, the systems for providing services and supports to adolescents are often fragmented, spread across government agencies, nonprofit organizations, health care providers, businesses, and faith-based organizations. More coherent, integrated approach to fostering health and healthy development would benefit all teens.



## Identified Gaps and Opportunities

To understand the current capacity and readiness for engaging in adolescent health promotion, participants in the action planning sessions discussed available community health resources for adolescents and identified gaps and opportunities. Of the adolescent services available throughout the state, participants mentioned a variety of programs such as leadership and internship opportunities, scholarships, home-based youth programs, cultural camps, and various after-school programs. Participants repeatedly expressed support for additional programs and services.

**Needs.** The discussions demonstrated a need for additional resources that focus on youth health promotion. Participants agreed that Alaska Native-specific, evidenced-based resources for youth were lacking throughout schools, tribes, and villages. Notably, several participants felt that data and services focused on deficits and did not provide strength-based approaches focused on positive adolescent choices. In addition, it was mentioned that leadership across all levels must be made more aware of the current services and gaps in services available to adolescents within their communities to facilitate the development of more tribal policies that would advance adolescent health.

**Assets.** Participants felt that there was a baseline level of resources and cultural assets that aid in promoting adolescent health. These include knowledge and wisdom of Elders within the community, culture camps, Potlatches and Alaska Native dances.

**Desired Role for ANTHC.** In addition to identifying community needs and assets, participants discussed strategies they would like to see ANTHC implement to strengthen adolescent health:

- Identifying focus areas and trends
- Engaging stakeholders
- Educating communities
- Advocating for programs
- Assisting with program resources
- Providing accountability and sustainability of implemented and new programs

## Identified Strengths and Weaknesses

### STRENGTHS

Adult and Elder involvement

Home-based youth programs

Culture Camps

Community (mentors, coaches, family, elders)

Alaska Native traditions (dancing, potlatches)

Leadership and scholarship opportunities

Alaska Native Education Programs

Basketball as a bonding activity

Coalitions with various Alaska Native organizations

### WEAKNESSES

Limited resources (staff, money, locations)

Some tribes lack resources to establish/maintain programs for youth

Limited mental health resources

Not focusing on strengths within youth and their communities

Need/desire for technology to be in everything

Fragmented services and programs, lack of coordination

Lack of male leadership

Geographic locations

Lack of socialization out of school



## **GOAL 1: NURTURE YOUTHS' CULTURAL CONNECTIONS THROUGH PROGRAMS AND SERVICES**

- STRATEGY 1** Provide education on healthy communication and connection practices via in-person, online, at work, at home, and at school.
- STRATEGY 2** Incorporate Alaska Native languages and history into already established places of learning and gathering.
- STRATEGY 3** Offer opportunities for leadership activities, recognizing that cultural activities are leadership-building activities.
- STRATEGY 4** Connect Elders and youths by providing mentorship opportunities.
- STRATEGY 5** Provide opportunities for community members to become recognized, trusted adults.
- STRATEGY 6** Establish, nurture, and maintain connections between tribal leaders, community members, educators, and youth.
- STRATEGY 7** Develop adolescent peer-support programs and networks.

## **GOAL 2: EMPOWER ADOLESCENTS AND YOUNG ADULTS TO REALIZE THEIR FULL POTENTIAL AND PROVIDE THEM WITH THE SUPPORT AND RESOURCES NEEDED TO TAKE AN ACTIVE ROLE IN THEIR OWN HEALTH AND WELL-BEING**

- STRATEGY 1** Prepare Alaska Native adolescents and young adults to take an active role in their own health and well-being through leadership training, mentorship and internship opportunities, community services, career path and financial literacy opportunities and other positive extracurricular activities.
- STRATEGY 2** Develop and disseminate evidence-based or practice-based health education campaigns and programs that encompass lifelong learning approaches.
- STRATEGY 3** Develop and disseminate multimedia health resources (using the Internet, texting, social networking, videos, and print materials) to connect adolescents to medically accurate, culturally congruent health information.
- STRATEGY 4** Connect Alaska Native adolescents and young adults to resources, peer support, advocacy, and education to help navigate Alaska's behavioral health and child-serving systems of care.
- STRATEGY 5** Support tribal communities in their development of teen-friendly and trauma-informed medical and mental health care, wellness, and social services.

## **GOAL 3: SUPPORT COMMUNITIES TO PROVIDE SAFE AND SECURE PLACES FOR ADOLESCENTS AND YOUNG ADULTS TO LIVE, LEARN, AND GROW**

- STRATEGY 1** Invest in safe schools, wellness and community centers, clinics, homes, and safe places for youth to congregate, engage in healthy physical activity and experience traditional and subsistence activities such as culture camps
- STRATEGY 2** Create policies and protocols, and train staff and caregivers in how to provide safe spaces for teens and young adults that are free of bullying, racism and microaggressions and supportive of LGBTQ and Two-Spirit youth (i.e. access to Gay Straight Alliance Clubs (GSAs) and other resources).

## Strategy Spotlights



### Healthy Native Youth

Healthy Native Youth is a one-stop-shop for educators and health advocates who want to expand learning opportunities for AI/AN youth ([www.HealthyNativeYouth.org](http://www.HealthyNativeYouth.org)). The site contains curricula, quizzes, handouts and training tools needed to access and deliver effective, age-appropriate sexual health programs, and monthly Community of Practice topical calls.

### Safe in the Village (SITV)

Safe in the Village (SITV) is a culturally relevant video program to help start conversations about healthy relationships and safe behaviors with Alaska Native youth. The film is about three friends – Matt, Sarah and Ben – in a rural Alaska community navigating life issues, like sex, alcohol, and bullying while thinking about their futures. It also demonstrates the importance of having trusted adults and goals in life. SITV YouTube [playlist](#).

### iknowmine

iknowmine is a multimedia wellness website ([www.iknowmine.org](http://www.iknowmine.org)) that aims to provide truthful and accurate information that youth can trust to take control of their own health and well-being. iknowmine is a program run by the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium to help support Alaska Native youth and those who serve them by covering topics from sexual health, relationships; to mental and spiritual health; LGBTQ2S+; alcohol, tobacco and other drugs and more.

### Culture Heals. Community Heals. Tradition Heals.

Culture Heals. Community Heals. Tradition Heals., is a social media campaign to provide awareness and information around substance misuse and resources about how to reach out for help and support those who are impacted by substance misuse.

### Positive Youth Development Afterschool Program.

The goals of the Positive Youth Development Afterschool Program are the reduction of risk factors and the enhancement of protective factors among participating youth and families to:

- Increase the availability of recreational, educational, and character-building programs for youth outside school hours;
- Enhance individual, family, school, and community protective factors while reducing risk factors related to marijuana use; and
- Reduce initiation and promote cessation of marijuana use by youth, reduce youth access to marijuana products, and reduce exposure of youth to impaired driving dangers related to marijuana use.

To learn more visit [www.akafterschool.org/pydap-grantees-page](http://www.akafterschool.org/pydap-grantees-page).

### Talking is Power

Talking with youth about sensitive topics is never easy, but it's important. You are your teen's biggest influencer when it comes to making decisions about sex and healthy relationships. Parents and caring adults who sign up for this service receive up to 3 text messages per week with conversation starters, tips, video demonstrations, and words of encouragement. Messages cover sexual health, pregnancy, STDs, and consent.

## Limitations

On April 23, 2019, multiple adolescent and youth partners gathered to participate in the Working Together to Create Healthier Communities for Native Youth: An Action Planning Session. Since the Action Planning Session took place in Anchorage, this document is limited to the general thoughts, beliefs, and strategies discussed by those who were able to attend. However, participants represented communities, regions and organizations across Alaska. Thus, we hope that others will also find it relevant and helpful. Despite our best efforts to include adolescents and young adults in the action planning session, due to the timing of the meeting and school schedules this was not possible. It is our hope that we will be able to do so in the future, as any adolescent health promotion should include youth voices.

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