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History of Sobriety Awareness Month in Alaska

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What is the origin of Sobriety Awareness Month in Alaska? What are some recent statistics for alcohol and drug use in Alaska?

Beginning in 1995 through 2006, the Alaska Legislature designated March as Sobriety Awareness Month. Additionally, in each of those years the respective governor of Alaska issued a proclamation recognizing March as Sobriety Awareness Month.

Origins of Sobriety Awareness Month

In recognition of the growing grass roots Native sobriety movement, the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) in 1989 passed a resolution at its annual meeting to create the AFN Sobriety Movement. The goals of the Movement included encouraging and supporting alcohol-free and drug-free Native families, practicing traditional Native values and activities, and working with existing groups and individuals to promote sobriety among Alaska Natives. The Movement supported numerous activities throughout rural Alaska in support of sobriety, including the "Iditapledge for Sobriety." The Iditapledge was spearheaded by Aniak musher and sobriety activist Mike Williams, who first ran the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race in 1992 carrying signatures of Alaskans who had pledged sobriety.¹ By the 1994 race, Mr. Williams was carrying 10,000 signatures pledging sobriety.² The Iditapledge proved to be a successful means of bringing attention to the sobriety movement and raising funds to allow sobriety activists to travel throughout rural Alaska to advocate and support sobriety.

¹ Pledged signatures were transferred to microfilm, which the musher, in ceremonial fashion, carried in the race. Symbolically, the sobriety pledge signatures represented a "serum of commitment" needed to cure the devastating effects of alcohol and drugs. The Center for Alcohol and Addiction Studies and Institute for Circumpolar Health Studies, "Alaska Natives Combating Substance Abuse and Related Violence Through Self-Healing: A Report for the People," June 1999, at <https://www.uaa.alaska.edu/academics/college-of-health/departments/ACRHHW/dataandreportspages/1999afn.cshhtml>.

² Lew Freedman, "Williams' Sled Carries Iditarod's Baggage," *Anchorage Daily News*, March 20, 1994; Mike Williams, Sr. and Lew Freedman, *Racing Toward Recovery: The Extraordinary Story of Alaska Musher Mike Williams, Sr.*, Graphic Arts Books, 2015.

As the Iditarod Trail Race typically occurs in March of each year, the AFN selected March as Sobriety Awareness Month to coincide with the Iditapledge. In 1995, Representative Irene Nicholia introduced HCR 11, which designated the first Sobriety Awareness Month as March 1995. The resolution endorsed “sobriety as a solution to the substance abuse problem in the state” and paid tribute to those individuals who have pledged themselves to sobriety.³ The AFN noted that rather than primarily focusing on the “problem” of substance abuse, sobriety embraced a positive “solution” to the abuse of alcohol and drugs.⁴ The AFN further testified that Sobriety Awareness Month set a precedent not only in Alaska history, but U.S. history. This resolution made Alaska the first state to recognize sobriety as a lifestyle.⁵

In 1996, the AFN encouraged Alaska lawmakers to further recognize and support Alaskans who choose sobriety by adding language to the state’s policy in the Uniform Alcoholism and Treatment Act at AS 47.37.010. In 1996, the House Judiciary Committee introduced HB 523, which added the following language to the policy:

It is the policy of the state to recognize, appreciate, and reinforce the example set by its citizens who lead, believe in, and support a life of sobriety.

During committee hearing on HB 523, Daniella Loper, aide to Representative Brian Porter, testified that the Division of Alcoholism and Drug Abuse had placed the definition of sobriety in their strategic plan, “Meeting the Challenge,” which had been adopted by the division and the Governor. Greg Nothstine, Coordinator, AFN Sobriety Movement, testified in support of HB 523, because “it represents a positive paradigm shift in the state’s policy for preventing alcohol and drug abuse in Alaska.” He added that sobriety not only improves the quality of life and health but helps reduce the incidence of alcohol- and drug-related crime and reduces the burden of government to pay for consequences and problems caused by drug and alcohol abuse.⁶

³ A copy of HCR 11 is available at <http://www.akleg.gov/basis/Bill/Detail/19?Root=hcr%2011>.

⁴ Committee Minutes from the House State Affairs Committee, February 28, 1995, and Senate State Affairs Committee, March 2, 1995, at http://www.akleg.gov/basis/Bill/Detail/19?Root=hcr%2011#tab4_4.

⁵ House Health, Education and Social Services Committee, February 29, 1996, at <http://www.akleg.gov/basis/Meeting/Detail?Meeting=HHES%201996-02-29%2015:26:00>.

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(footnote continued)

In a House Judiciary Committee hearing, Representative Brian Porter stated that, “The sobriety movement of the native community in the AFN is probably the best program the state has seen in a long time.”⁷ The House passed HB 523 by a vote of 38-0 and the Senate by a vote of 20-0.

The Legislature continued to support Sobriety Awareness Month by passing resolutions in each year through 2006, designating March as Sobriety Awareness Month.⁸

We did not identify any other state that has formally designated a Sobriety Awareness Month; however, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) sponsors a National Recovery Month every September, since 1999.⁹ According to SAMHSA, National Recovery Month celebrates the gains made by those in recovery and reinforces the positive message that prevention works, treatment is effective, and people can and do recover. In related efforts, the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (NCADD) has sponsored April as Alcohol Awareness Month since 1987. The NCADD created Alcohol Awareness Month to help reduce the stigma so often associated with alcoholism and to increase awareness and understanding of alcoholism, its causes, effective treatment options, and recovery.¹⁰ Additionally, the federal Office of National Drug Control Policy established October as National Substance Abuse Prevention Month, which focuses on raising public awareness and encourages communities to take action to prevent substance abuse.¹¹

Alcohol and Drug Use Data for Alaska

Alcohol abuse in Alaska remains a persistent and challenging problem. Alaskans surveyed for the Healthy Alaskans 2020 project indicated that alcohol use was one of the leading two health concerns among all health topics.¹²

The Alaska Scorecard for 2016, which is produced by the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, in conjunction with the Mental Health Trust Authority, reported the following regarding alcohol and drug use in the state:

⁷ House Judiciary Committee, March 4, 1996, at <http://www.akleg.gov/basis/Meeting/Detail?Meeting=HJUD%201996-03-04%2013:04:00>.

⁸ SCR 4 (1997), SCR 21 (1998), SR1 (1998), SCR 12 (2000), SCR 2 (2001), SCR 22 (2002), SCR 5 (2003), SCR 21 (2004), HCR 1 (2005), and HCR 33 (2006).

⁹ More information on National Recovery Month can be accessed at <https://recoverymonth.gov/about>.

¹⁰ More information on Alcohol Awareness Month is viewable at <https://www.ncadd.org/about-ncadd/events-awards/alcohol-awareness-month>.

¹¹ The Office of National Drug Policy was created in 1988 as a component of the Executive Office of the President to coordinate drug control efforts and funding and to advise the president on drug control issues.

¹² Healthy Alaskans 2020 Health Assessment: Understanding the Health of Alaskans at http://hss.state.ak.us/ha2020/assets/HA2020_HealthAssessment.pdf.

- The 2015 rate of Alaskans that identify as “heavy drinkers” is 36 percent higher than the U.S. rate.
- The 2015 Alaska rate for binge drinking among adults is 26 percent higher than the U.S. rate.
- The 2015 alcohol-induced mortality rate for Alaska is 140 percent higher than the 2014 U.S. rate (the most recent year for which data are available).
- For illicit drug use, the 2013-2014 Alaska rate is 35 percent higher than the U.S. rate.¹³

According to a report produced by the McDowell Group, in 2015, alcohol abuse cost the state’s economy an estimated \$1.84 billion dollars. These costs include increased health care costs, increased criminal justice system costs, lost or reduced workplace productivity, greater spending on public assistance and social services, and a range of other impacts. Thus, the state and local governments, employers, and residents of Alaska all bear the costs.¹⁴

We hope this is helpful. If you have questions or need additional information, please let us know.

¹³ The Alaska Scorecard 2016 can be accessed at http://dhss.alaska.gov/dph/HealthPlanning/Documents/scorecard/2016%20Trust%20Scorecard_final_2-16-2017.pdf.

¹⁴ “The Economic Costs of Alcohol Abuse in Alaska, 2016 Update,” prepared by the McDowell Group for the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority, March 2017, at <https://www.mcdowellgroup.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/mcdowell-group-economic-impacts-of-alcohol-abuse-final-3.22.17.pdf>.