

March 14, 2023

Hearing for HB 78 Act, establishing September 10th as Community Health Aide Appreciation Day.

Asela Calhoun, MA PhD, Community Health Aide Program Director/Education

Good morning and thank you Representative McCormick and members of this committee for the invitation and opportunity to testify at this hearing.

Introduction: My name is Asela Calhoun, Director of CHAP Programs and Education at the Yukon Kuskokwim Health Corporation (YKHC).

YKHC serves 58 communities in the YK Delta, with 48 villages having clinics within the community (5 are Subregional and 42 are village clinics).

I believe it is fitting that Community Health Aides (CHA/P) be recognized as pillars of healthcare in remote Alaska. By way of a brief history, the concept of CHAs as healthcare providers in their home villages developed and morphed over a period of more than 50 years. Beginning in the 1950s to help stamp out a TB epidemic, it quickly became evident that CHAs could bridge the gap in access to care for remote and isolated indigenous communities throughout Alaska. In 1968, the program was recognized and federally funded by the U.S. Congress. In 1969, YKHC opened the first CHA Training Program.

Subsequently, several other Training Centers were formed throughout Alaska; the Statewide curriculum was developed in partnership with University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF); CHA Basic Training Curriculum was standardized; and the CHA Manual (CHAM) was completed. The 1990s were growing years, with the 1994 Alaska Tribal Health Compact, expanding training opportunities for Tribal Health Organizations (THO) throughout the State and the establishment of the CHA Certification Board Standards and Procedures.

Moving forward to 2023, the CHA/P Program in Alaska is unique, rich in culture, community, stories, quality care, and consistent provision of care close to home for our remote communities. It has become the model to imitate as other programs develop in the lower 48 in the future.

Community Health Aides provide routine and acute medical care, preventative care (including immunizations, well-child checks, patient education, prenatal visits, and community health events, such as mass flu clinics), as well as respond to emergencies, often saving many lives. They rotate after-hours and weekend on-call response, sometimes for very long periods, especially during inclement weather, waiting for medivacs, keeping very ill or injured patients stable, until transport to a higher level of care is available. CHAs face these challenges with grace and resiliency, out of a high professional ethic and love for their communities.

In one of our recent surveys to CHA/Ps in our region, a sentiment analysis described the value ascribed to being or becoming a Community Health Aide (CHA/P) as a very personal and deeply held tradition.

Key words reflected and described the value given by the Health Aides to the history of the Community Health Aide Program in Alaska and the very personal impact of this profession to them, their villages, and the people of the Yukon Delta. Words or phrases repeated often included, and I quote: “I am able to help my community, help the village community be healthier, and educate the community about health matters.”

Multiple comments eloquently expressed how being a Health Aide became generational in families and I quote, “I became a Health Aide because my mother was a Health Aide.”

Also important was the element of pride and respect gained by the individual that serves their village and peoples in this role. Example: In 2022 AFN recognized a mother/daughter team of CHPs who serve at their village of Mekoryuk, for immunizing 98% of their village population against COVID-19 within a short period of time after the vaccine was released and approved for use.

I will close with a compelling illustration:

If any one of us found ourselves or our families in a very remote area, miles from the nearest hospital or facility, suddenly faced with illness, or unexpected injury, it would be comforting to know that our close neighbor is a qualified, trained healthcare provider who can assist, stabilize or even save our life, while truly caring for us personally. This is a fitting description of what the Community Health Aide does, day in and day out, for their communities.

CHA/Ps are without a doubt the Heart of Care in the remote villages of the YK Delta and Alaska. We lend our wholehearted support for the HB 78 Act establishing September 10th as Community Health Aide Appreciation Day.

Quyana, Representative McCormick and members of this committee, for your consideration of this testimony.

I’d be happy to answer any questions.

Asela Calhoun, BS, MA, PhD
Director, Community Health Aide Program/Education
Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation CHAP Programs
P.O. Box 528 Bethel, AK 99559
(O) 907-543-6144 (c) 907-545-2587 (f) 907-543-6143