

**OVERVIEW**

**AK**

**NATIVE**

**HEALTH**

**BOARD**

**HOUSE HESS COMMITTEE**  
**Presentation Material**  
**By**  
**Alaska Native Health Board Representatives**

**February 19, 2002**  
**4:00 p.m.**

**OPENING REMARKS**

Good afternoon Mr. Chairman, Representative Fred Dyson, and all of the House HESS Committee Members. On behalf of the full board of directors of the Alaska Native Health Board, we thank you for providing us the opportunity to provide you an overview of some of the Alaska Native Health Board 2002 & 2003 Statewide Priorities.

As you may already know, the Alaska Native Health Board is the Statewide Native Health Advocacy Organization with membership to include all 638 Compact members, large and small across our Great State. We represent a well-organized, complicated and intricate health care system that many, many Alaska residents, Native & Non-Native rely on for their daily health care. The Board uses a comprehensive definition of health, which includes water and sewer, infrastructure, prevention and education. We feel strongly that all matters concerning Alaska Natives, Rural Alaska and all public health matters affect our ability to deliver the best health care possible and thus, we come before you today to discuss our State Priorities, which include: Suicide Prevention, Rural Sanitation, Rural Community Runway Lights, Support for Long Term Care for Elders, Support for Behavioral Health Services Programs, Maintaining the Medicaid Program and the Denali KidCare Program.

## RURAL SANITATION

Mr. Chairman and Committee Members, the most significant needs in rural Alaska with respect to water and sewer systems and solid waste management include the need to:

1. To have the ability to plan and pay for on-going operation and maintenance systems. To do this we must maintain state-funded programs, such as the Remote Maintenance Worker (RMW) and Rural Utility Business Advisor Program (RUBA).

The Alaska Native Health Board encourages the legislature and state government to look at creative alternatives for increasing the capacity of the RUBA program by supporting contractual or partnership relationships with organizations that can provide the needed training and assistance to rural communities. ANHB would be happy to assist in this effort and provide advice, technical support as well as a communication network unlike any currently existing in the State.

ANHB further encourages the legislature to increase funding to an adequate level to meet demand. Our populations are growing, current systems must be maintained to keep up with the growth and expansion and old systems are being replaced with more complicated systems that require higher levels of expertise and technical abilities.

The Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation's Remote Maintenance Worker Program assists rural communities with:

- Sanitation facility operation and maintenance
- Operator and utility manager training
- Emergency troubleshooting
- Repair of water and wastewater systems,
- And Sanitation facility project assistance.

2. Mr. Chairman, we must also have the technical, financial, and managerial capacity to plan for the sanitation needs so that communities can manage and operate their systems in an effective manner for the expected life of the system. Without this, the investment the State and our organizations have made or will make will be put in jeopardy. The Alaska Native Health Board has a long-standing committee, The Rural Alaska Sanitation Coalition or RASC as you may know them, that has the ability to advise us, the State, the Governor's Rural Sanitation Council and others interested in what they have to offer in regards to Statewide planning, financial funding availability and expert, rural sanitation management. Alaska Native Health Board encourages the State Legislators to support the continued funding for RASC through the Alaska Housing Finance Corporation.
3. We must also have adequate funding and financial support to plan, design, construct, and operate and maintain community based rural sanitation projects for sewer and water infrastructure systems and solid waste management. For these efforts, the Alaska Native Health Board requests State Legislators to take action on:
  - Support the Governor's Council on Rural Sanitation's efforts to recognize the need for separate funding for solid waste management in communities throughout Alaska.
  - Designate funding for solid and hazardous waste management and projects that does not compete or take away from existing funding for rural sanitation.

## **IMPLEMENT RURAL COMMUNITY RUNWAY LIGHTS**

As you know, Mr. Chairman and Committee members, and probably as you or your family members have experienced in rural Alaska there are many communities without adequate runways, runway lights, let alone Medevac capability. We urge State Legislators to prioritize and plan for placing runway lights, beacons, and instrument approach lights in the remote communities with runways.

The dependency on rural Alaska runways was emphasized on September 11, 2001. The Alaska Statewide Health Care Delivery System was crippled when the 'no-flight regulation' was implemented due to the terrorist attacks on the United States. In order to implement an effective Statewide Emergency Preparedness Plan, basic needs such as runway lights should be provided to ensure that residents in rural Alaska are provided Medevac service when life and death situations occur.

Over 200 Alaska communities do not have road access to the nearest inpatient medical facilities. Over ½ of the user population within the Alaska Area Native Health Service live in these rural communities. The lack of adequate runway lights is one of the most critical factors affecting aviation access to these communities.

There are 202 Alaskan communities that rely entirely on air transport to the nearest inpatient medical facilities. Runway lights are provided at 113 airports at these remote communities. There are beacons at 94 of the airports. 12 airports have instrument approach lights. There are not lights at 63 airports.

The Alaska Native Health Board requests the State Legislature to become a partner in advocating and funding Alaska's Rural Community Airports. It truly is a life and death matter.

## **MAINTAIN MEDICAID AND DENALI KIDCARE PROGRAM FUNDING**

It is true that we, as Indian Health Service beneficiaries are a large user of the Medicaid and Denali KidCare Program. But did you also know that this fact has a positive impact on our States economy? The State of Alaska receives 100% reimbursement for IHS beneficiaries that utilize both of these programs. The positive effects from this reimbursement include:

- Broader user-access to the non-native population; and,
- Creates employment opportunities in the private sector that would otherwise not be available.

The detrimental effects of cutting the programs would be:

- 17% of the employees within the private healthcare sector are funded due to the Medicaid and Denali KidCare Programs. Cutting back the programs will begin an unhealthy cycle. It equals a reduction in jobs, individuals losing their employment, then those families seeking to access these very programs due to the loss of private health care insurance and unemployment.
- Reducing the Medicaid and Denali KidCare Program would also actively harm people receiving care by eliminating services for adults; pregnant women, and children
- Lastly, reimbursement to providers would also be reduced.

In all these incidents reduce access to healthcare, and are detrimental to our health. *The Alaska Native Health Board strongly urges the House HESS Committee to support maintaining the Medicaid and Denali KidCare Programs.*

## SUPPORT FOR LONG-TERM CARE FOR ELDERS

We want our elder's home. The last years of life should be with family and loved ones. The State of Alaska Division of Senior Services program for Rural Long-Term Care is attempting to address this need. Kay Branch and her staff work to increase the number of assisted living homes in Rural Areas and to ensure broad availability of other home and community based programs statewide. The benefits of these programs to the State of Alaska and our rural communities are that:

- They are more cost effective than placing elders in a skill nursing home.
- They keep elders in their communities or region and close to family, which keeps a community whole and increases the well being of the family; and,
- Provides for increased economic development in our rural communities through sustainable jobs for village residents.

*The Alaska Native Health Board requests the Legislature support this program through:*

- *Increased funding to state housing programs for senior and special needs housing projects;*
- *Increasing or a maintaining funding for services to elders through the Alaska Commission on Aging Programs and Personal Care Service programs;*
- *Additional funding for Medicaid waiver services; and,*
- *Increase funding allocations for the State Personal Care Services Program to allow for higher pay and benefit packages for worker.*

## **SUPPORT FOR BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SERVICE PROGRAMS**

*The Alaska Native Health Board encourages the legislature to support the implementation of a Behavioral Health Aide Program into Rural Alaska.*

We suffer from extremely high rates of alcoholism and other substance abuse dependencies. We suffer from escalated rates of suicide. We know in our hearts that we can help ourselves. Our goal with the Behavioral Health Aide Program is to model it after our highly successful Community Health Aide Program. We want to train and hire our own community members to assist in the healing our families and individuals, like only we know how. We need the support from our Alaska State Legislature to endorse our vision.

## **SUICIDE PREVENTION**

As mentioned before, suicide incidents among our family and loved ones is 274% higher than the national average and 117% higher than other Native American Groups. On average there are 46 suicides per year or a suicide in a native community every 8 days. These are our brothers, our uncles, our sisters, and our aunts; sometimes our children and our mothers and fathers.

*We strongly encourage the legislature to increase funding to address the high rate of Suicide in Alaska through prevention.*