

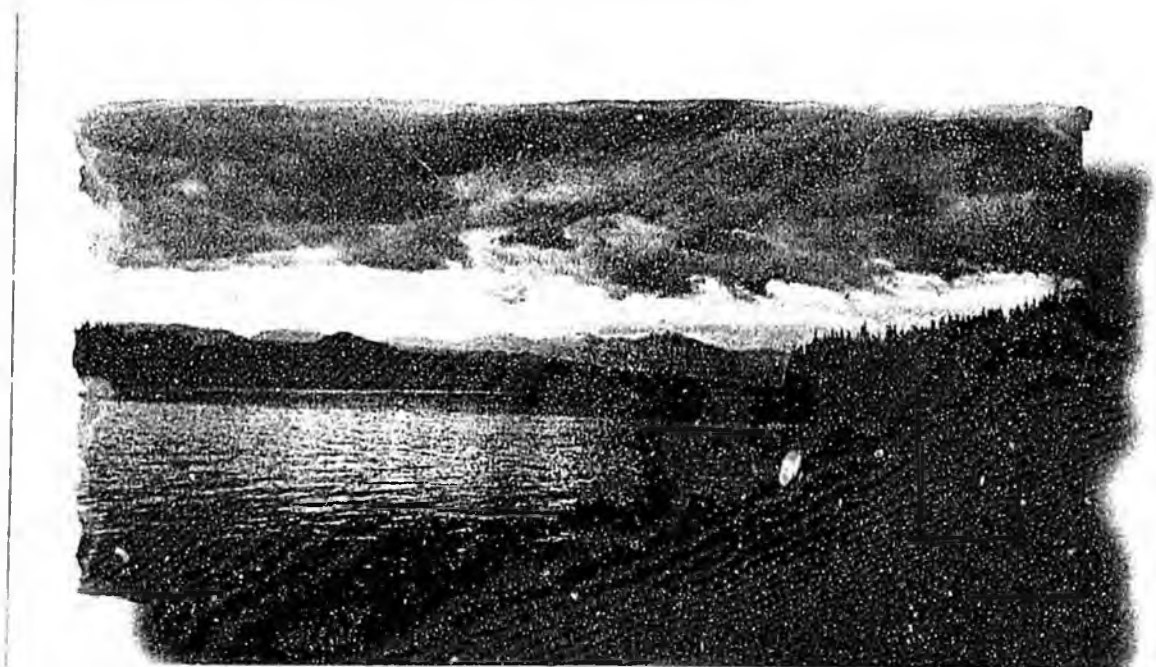
OVERVIEW:
CROSSINGS
WILDERNESS
EXPEDITIONS
FOR YOUTH

Crossings Wilderness Expeditions for Youth

Wrangell Community Services
Crossings Wilderness Expeditions for Youth
Outdoor Behavioral Health Programming in Wrangell Alaska

Table of Contents

Introduction.....2
Wrangell Community Services Agency Overview.....3
What Is Wilderness Therapy?.....4
Crossings Wilderness Expeditions for Youth Program Description.....6
Crossings Wilderness Expeditions for Youth Risk Management.....8
Does Wilderness Therapy Work?.....10
Does Crossings Wilderness Expeditions for Youth Work?.....12
Financial Implications of CWEY Programming to the State of Alaska.....13
The Future.....14
Conclusions.....16



Crossings Wilderness Expeditions for Youth

Introduction

We would like to thank the Medicaid/Medicare committee for the opportunity to present

information about Crossings Wilderness Expeditions for Youth (CWEY). This new Alaska-based program has become an affordable alternative to sending youth out of state for mental health services. We believe that it is very important that the state build internal capacity to handle the demand for youth mental health services. CWEY is helping to keep our children close to home, while still meeting family and community expectations.



We would like to thank Representative Peggy Wilson for inviting us to speak with the committee. Representative Wilson has personally visited the program and has helped influence the ultimate direction of CWEY. Her insight into current issues and her feedback on the direction of the program has been invaluable.

We would like to invite any member of the committee to visit the program. Please contact Stephen Prysunka at (907) 723-2782 for arrangement details.

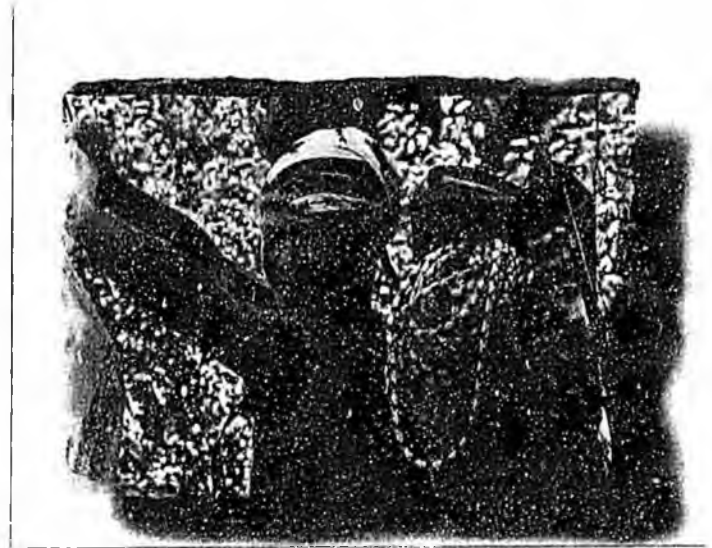
Thank you for your interest in the CWEY program. Together we can help Alaska's youth, right here at home!

Crossings Wilderness Expeditions for Youth

Wrangell Community Services

Agency Overview

Wrangell Community Services (WCS) is a 501(3) C, not-for-profit corporation, and is an authorized Community Mental Health Facility in the State of Alaska. This agency, under the direction of Mark Walker, has been in operation for 15 years. The agency is presently one of Wrangell's top employers with 60 full- and part-time employees.



WCS provides services to Wrangell, Prince of Wales Island, and Metlakatla. Programs include: remote medical general practice clinics, school counseling programs, Alaska Native Education programs, remote community family support workers, as well as services for the elderly and the developmentally disabled. Many of these programs utilize non-state funding sources.

Crossings Wilderness Expeditions for Youth was created in 2001. The program was developed with a multitude of funding sources. The program's local support base included contributions from individuals, Wrangell Medical Center, the Lions Club, Wrangell Volunteer Firefighters Association, Wrangell Police Department, the Nolan Foundation, Wrangell Chamber of Commerce, and Wrangell Public Schools. The initial equipment purchase utilized local funds, and was in excess of \$75,000. CWEY has become a source of pride for the people of Wrangell. We have grown from three employees serving sixteen children to a staff of twenty with our projected participation for 2004 at over eighty children. As well, the program is receiving national attention through our innovative approach to staffing and program development.

What Is Wilderness Therapy?

Therapeutic Wilderness Programs differ from traditional wilderness programs in that they emphasize group therapy and a therapeutic process facilitated by guides in the field. The basic premise behind these programs is that the wilderness presents an environment that cannot be manipulated. Through the use of positive peer pressure, retrospective group discussions, and the building of traditional wilderness skills, adolescents begin to understand through metaphor the skills and behaviors that are necessary to lead productive lives in society.



Therapeutic wilderness programs are sometimes referred to as Outdoor Education or Wilderness Therapy. Students quickly learn how cooperation, accountability for behaviors, and a strong work ethic can create a positive group environment where they can develop self-esteem and obtain greater self-knowledge. The natural environment lacks the negative stimulus associated with today's high speed pop culture. This environment creates a new context for participants to explore and practice new and refined behaviors. Teenagers with behavioral and emotional problems begin to explore their relationships with others and their issues with authority, peers, and family members. Positive peer pressure replaces negative peer pressure. The group encourages defiant individual teens to participate in the necessary activities for an outdoor wilderness experience.

Many troubled adolescents make significant progress during a relatively short time span in wilderness programs. The cost of these short-term programs is relatively low when compared with longer-term residential therapeutic facilities or boarding schools. The average program lasts four to eight weeks.

Crossings Wilderness Expeditions for Youth

Wilderness programs differ dramatically from boot camps in that the primary facilitator of change is the wilderness itself. Nature serves as the ultimate teacher, unable to be manipulated or conned by a defiant, angry adolescent. Such an environment by necessity requires certain behaviors and actions. Teens quickly learn how cooperating with their peers results in a significantly more positive experience than when they refuse to participate in certain activities, such as fire building, food preparation, and camp set-up. Although there is strong leadership in such programs, there is no "drill sergeant" demanding children participate in pointless activities. All activities relate to living in the wilderness and making the experience as rewarding as possible. While boot camps tend to be more punitive and jail-like in nature, the wilderness therapy program is liberating and fulfilling as the child learns he or she has the ability to learn new skills and cooperate within a group.

Risk management is a primary concern in any quality wilderness program. By keeping risk at a manageable level, wilderness programs create a physical environment where dramatic changes can take place, while keeping the participant as safe, if not safer, than they would be in their home and school environment. Any quality wilderness program will have support of a "base camp" that has the ability to contact field personnel. An Emergency Response Team is ready to respond at a moment's notice should any child become ill or injured. It should be noted that the rates of injury in qualified wilderness programs are extremely low.

By providing a safe yet dramatic environment where participants can develop positive behavioral changes, the wilderness experience accelerates the therapeutic process and gives students a powerful foundation on which to build a more positive, productive life.



Crossings Wilderness Expeditions for Youth

Crossings Wilderness Expeditions for Youth Program Description

CWEY offers young men and women ages 13 -18 years, the opportunity to participate in a 6-week wilderness expedition in Alaska. Each group, comprised of 6-12 individuals, completes a canoe and mountaineering expedition. These trips are the backdrop for a program of intense personal development. We provide the opportunity for youth to uncover and develop constructive personal competencies and team skills on their way to fulfilling graduation requirements of the program.



CWEY has a high field staff to participant ratio. Groups run at a maximum ratio of 1 staff for every 3 participants. Higher risk activities (either emotional or physical) run at a 1:2 ratio. This far exceeds the industry standard where you can find field ratios as high as 1:5.

Our program provides more therapy and psycho-education than other wilderness programs; however, we still maintain a culture of joy, wonder, play and fun. We believe it is all right to have fun while *exploring inner regions in the outer world*. The Crossings program is designed to fill the gap in the range of available treatment between weekly counseling sessions and long-term residential or inpatient treatment programs. Our goal is to help adolescents work through their resistance to accepting the need for continued treatment and to give them a boost toward maturity.

Crossings Wilderness Expeditions for Youth

The CWEY program has a very different approach to field staffing. Traditionally wilderness programs rotate staff in and out every eight days. We believe that this creates an emotional distance between the group and the new staff members. At CWEY, staff stays with the same group for 46 days. True relationships between staff and participants are developed through shared hardships, victories and setbacks. Through these mentor relationships, we can maximize our counseling encounters and mutual trust inevitability develops.

The average age of CWEY staff is 34. All guides are professionals who have dedicated themselves to the field of wilderness therapy. Staff members are trained in advanced wilderness first aid; river, ocean and lake canoe instructor level certification; Wilderness Emergency Response; river rescue; addiction treatment training; youth counseling crisis management training and sexual abuse training. We attract the very best in the field. This is in part due to the exciting work environment that we operate in, that being Alaska, but also because we provide remuneration and benefits that reflect our staff's high skill level and unique talents. We want staff that has a large portfolio of life skills to draw from.



Counseling concentrates on identified treatment goals: resolving conflicts, discussing strong feelings, processing solutions as issues come up, helping young people to see their own and others' behavior objectively, gaining a sense of control over their behavior, and finding sources of self-confidence. We also apply the lessons of current experience to life "back home," sharing and working to resolve the frustrations, fears, angers, and perceived inadequacies that have led to their problems. All of the programs are supervised by a Masters Level Counselor.

Crossings Wilderness Expeditions for Youth

CWEY Risk Management



Risk Management is a crucial part of the CWEY program. We view risk management as a living organism that is constantly evolving and changing as staff change, new trip locations are utilized, or management makeup evolves with new strengths and weaknesses. Our risk management program has been professionally developed and we are now in the final stage of implementation.

WE are very proud of our safety statistics. In our three years of operations, we have had only one reportable accident. This was in 2003 and involved a young woman who twisted her ankle while crossing a creek. She was sent home to recover for six days; however, she was able to return to the program and eventually graduated with her group.

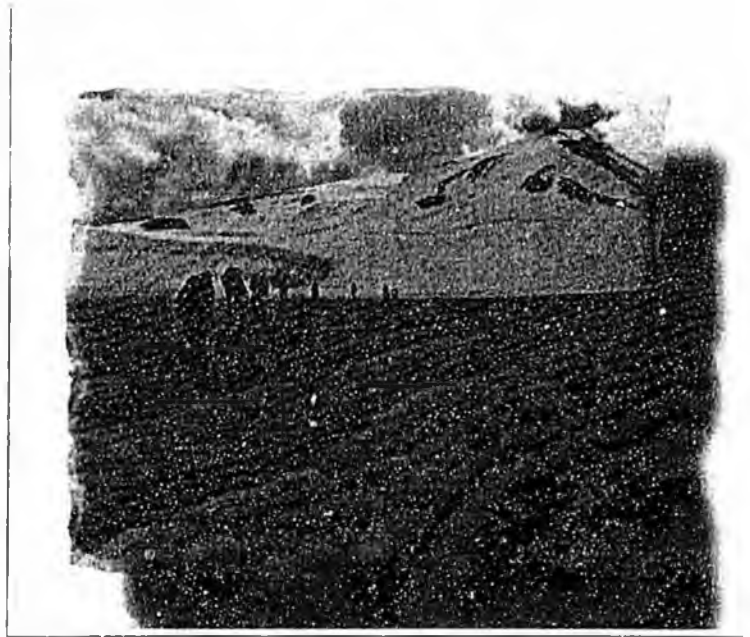
We believe that prevention of accidents and illness starts with the guides. CWEY has one of the toughest prerequisites list for guides in the industry. Our guides must have over 300 field days of previous guiding experience. As well, all of our guides must have a proven history in the wilderness therapy field. This means that they need previous experience guiding similar clients in other organizations. We do not take guides who are "trying" the field out to see if they like it. These two factors mean that we get older, more mature staff that we are proud to bring into our small community. CWEY is the industry leader in the area of guide compensation. Although this can be a burden to the budget, we have found that we need less management because we have great guides.

The next area of importance is staff training. Each year Crossings completes 28 days of staff training (industry average is 7 days). This includes courses and testing in the following areas: USCG Captain's course, crisis intervention, counseling skills, canoe instructor certification, risk management, mountaineering, wilderness first aid, drug and alcohol counseling, wilderness travel skills, and search and rescue training.

Crossings Wilderness Expeditions for Youth

We also provide staff with funding for continuing education for the various certifications that we expect they maintain.

Equipment is a crucial component of our risk management program. In Alaska we must have the right gear in order to be safe and comfortable in our somewhat temperamental climate. At CWEY, all the gear that a participant needs for the program is provided for them. We ask each participant to bring rubber boots and underwear, but we can even provide these if it is a problem. By ensuring that each participant has top quality gear, we can remove gear failure from the risk equation. The right gear at the right time is crucial to being warm and comfortable in our Alaskan wilds.



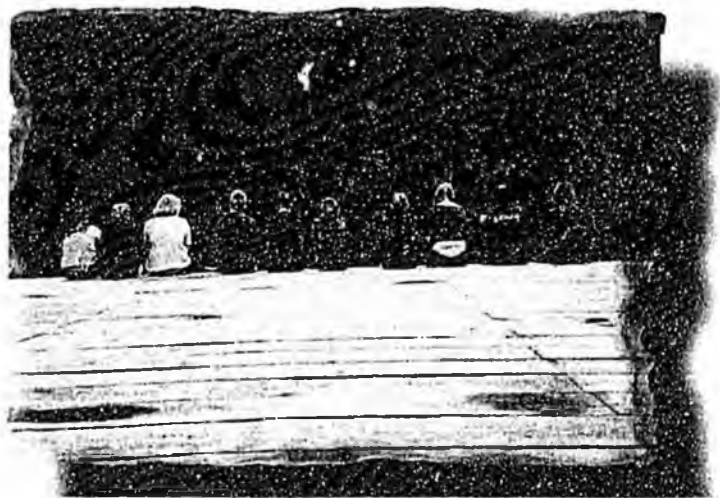
Another aspect of risk management is safety equipment. All CWEY programs carry a satellite phone, EPIRP, advance wilderness first aid kit, vhf radios, flares and GPS equipment. This equipment is no replacement for common sense and caution, but it adds a safety net to all our activities.

Management is the final risk management component. With well-trained managers, and a clear plan for dealing with the various situations that arise, we effectively support the field staff. Each spring we run a full situation drill that is evaluated by an outside observer. From this drill, we are better prepared to respond to the variety of situations that arise. On our risk management team we have our four managers, physician sponsor, professional risk manager, insurance broker and legal counsel. All of these individuals work together to insure that CWEY is prepared, proactive and aware of the risks inherent to wilderness therapy.

Crossings Wilderness Expeditions for Youth

This May we are undergoing a complete certification review by the Association of Experiential Education. Once completed we hope to become accredited by this industry leading organization. The accreditation is a crown jewel for any wilderness program and we will be the first Alaska-based program to attain this sought after certification. This will conclude three years of dedicated effort to meet these high standards. Our participants, their families and referring professionals will have the comfort of knowing that CWEY meets the highest industry standard for risk management and programming integrity.

Does Wilderness Therapy Work?



In a recent study of 858 adolescents participating in wilderness therapy programs, there was a significant reduction in behavioral and emotional symptoms as a result of this type of treatment.

In a report authored by Keith C. Russell, assistant professor and leader of the Outdoor Behavioral Healthcare Research Cooperative in the University of Idaho-Wilderness Research Center, describes results of a nationwide study of participants in OBH programs in 2000. The study assessed at-risk adolescents, the majority of whom were males, ages 12-19, after an average of 38 days in treatment using the Youth Outcome Questionnaire (Y-OQ®). The Y-OQ is designed to measure treatment progress by assessing behavioral dysfunction, interpersonal distress, and social problems to reflect the adolescent's well being. The questionnaire was administered at admission and discharge from treatment to adolescent clients and their parents to gather perceptions as to the client's baseline behavior and change following the treatment program.

Crossings Wilderness Expeditions for Youth

Eighty-three percent of parents perceived their children's clinical symptoms as improved as a result of treatment, and discharge scores were on average close to scores obtained from normal populations of adolescents. Statistically significant improvement was shown in behavioral dysfunction, interpersonal relations, and critical items, such as suicidal behavior. The findings confirm the idea that wilderness therapy treatment can improve behavior, reconcile family relations and help address the more serious underlying issues in adolescent's lives that may drive problem behavior.

Clients perceived their symptoms at admission as less severe than did their parents (70.67 compared to 100.19 for parents), but discharge scores were similar (client discharge scores were 47.55 and parents 48.55). Russell suggests that the differences in parent and client assessments at admission could be a result of adolescents' denial, not fully realizing or admitting the consequences of their past behaviors, but arriving at a clearer and more accurate assessment after treatment. He says, "the majority of clients entering wilderness therapy treatment do not want to be there and initially are extremely resistant to the process. They often believe there is no problem with their behaviors."

Phase two of the study will analyze data from three-, six-, and 12- month follow-up assessments of the same clients. "Continuing the research will help determine how long, and to what degree the positive results of treatment are maintained," said Russell, "and we also will examine how wilderness therapy treatment outcomes are affected by the kind of aftercare services utilized."



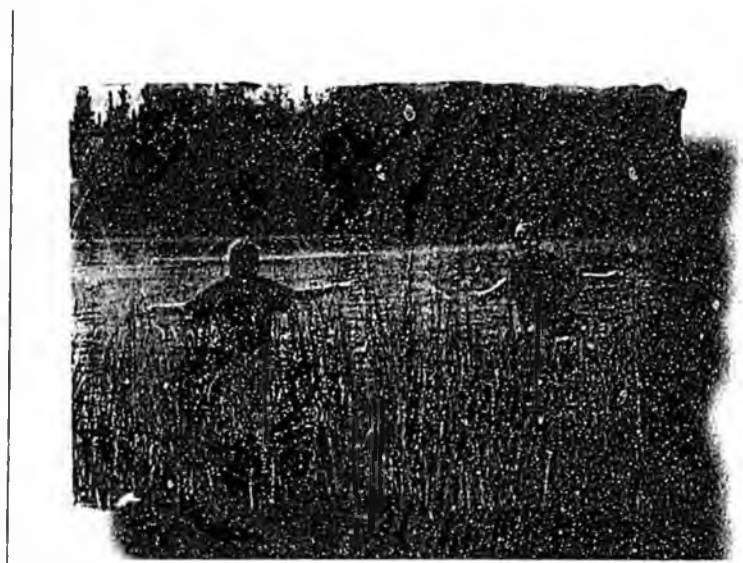
Crossings Wilderness Expeditions for Youth

Does CWEY Work?

Crossings Wilderness Expeditions is a "turn-around" type of program, designed to change the attitudes and self-esteem of participants. Virtually all of our participants will return home or go on to other programs less angry, frustrated, and blaming adults for their problems.

Our expectations for graduates are to:

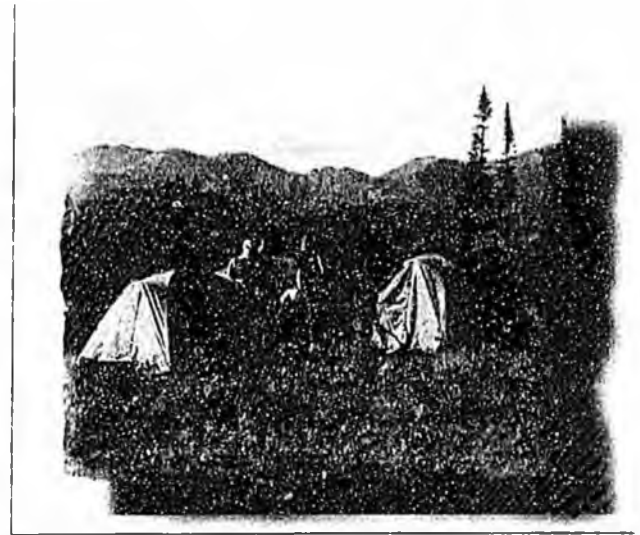
- Stop denying they have problems
- Be a positive active member of their family
- Comply with family rules regarding such things as curfew and friends
- Attend school regularly and work at their level of ability
- Quit any existing drug abuse and accept the help they need to stay clean and sober
- Accept responsibility for their own behavior and work to achieve their life goals
- Seek out a positive mentor in their community



In 2003, Crossings had a 96% graduation rate. The program operated at 88% capacity and for the first time ever we had to turn participants away from certain programs. The program had over 2700 backcountry user days and is now the single largest recreational user of the national forest in the Wrangell District.

Crossings Wilderness Expeditions for Youth

Crossings has three years of data to draw from and so far results are very positive. With this available data we are able to determine that 95% of families surveyed reported a marked improvement in their child's behavior directly after returning home from the program. 86% reported that changes were sustained past the six month anniversary and 77% note sustained results after the one-year anniversary.



Of note in our study is a diversion from out of state treatment programs. 53% of families reported that they had as a treatment option reviewed materials from residential programs. Only 7% of graduate's families reported that their child went onto residential treatment. CWEY is having a dramatic impact on reducing the number of youth leaving the state for long-term residential care.

For 2004 CWEY is going to participate in the University of Idaho-Wilderness Research Center's study. Although this program has a high user fee attached to it, we believe that we have a responsibility to our constituents, community and funding agencies to ensure that we are effective as compared to other national programs. We will be the only program from Alaska participating in this study.

Financial Implications of CWEY Programming to the State of Alaska

It is important to note that the state directly benefits from the diversion of children from costly residential placements in the lower 48. The average stay in a residential placement is one year. The average cost is \$90,000. Crossings cost is \$19,500 for six weeks. Every child that stays in state saves the Medicaid system \$70,500. Further savings are realized when you consider that we receive no reimbursement for children to travel to our programs. We pay all associated travel and escort cost from our program budget.

Crossings Wilderness Expeditions for Youth

If CWEY diverts 25 children from leaving the state in a year, the savings to the state is \$1,762,500. When you calculate in an average cost of travel and accommodations for participant and escort at \$6,500 you have an additional cost of \$162,500. Combined you have a savings of \$1,925,000.

When you consider that the state is saving money and that Medicaid dollars are infused back into the Alaskan economy, the merits of our high quality, well-managed wilderness therapy program is apparent.

The Future

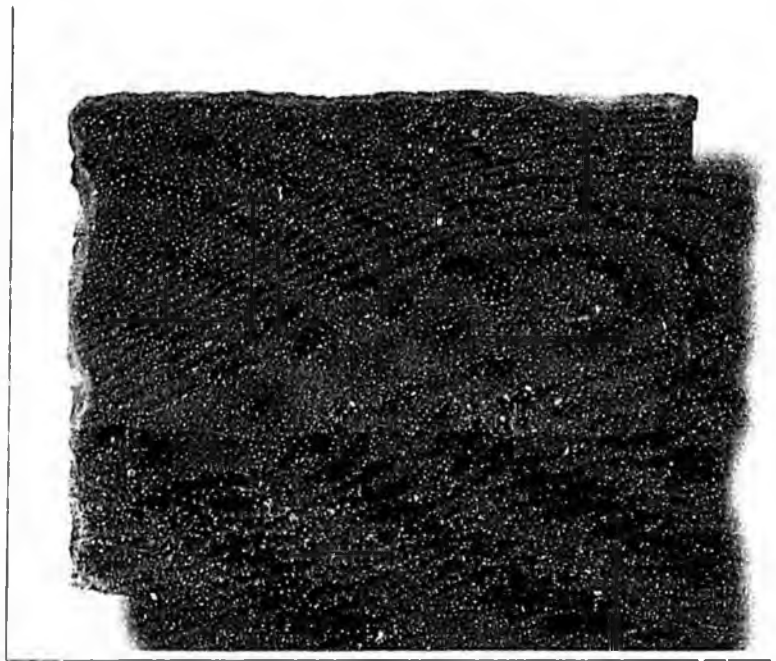
CWEY is always looking at ways of improving its services; to this end we are presently involved with RP Web Development. RP is designing and looking at the implementation of a new web access point that will allow past participants to continue with their personal development via the Internet. This would be the first program of its kind and we believe that it will be a model that will be repeated by other programs across the nation.

The site will allow participants to log on and complete various mental health projects, participate in a supervised chat room, have direct access to a therapist, participate in live web events, and utilize a web based resource area for everything from educational materials, to job finding resources.

The hook for the kids is that they will be able to earn rewards for participating in the program. Mountaingear.com has expressed interest in sponsoring the rewards program for participants. This is going to be capital-intensive project and we are presently attempting to secure funding from private sector sources We hope to implement a pilot project for our 2004 season.

Crossings Wilderness Expeditions for Youth

On the horizon is the launching of the Crossings Foundation. This not-for-profit foundation will raise funds for participants who presently cannot afford to attend. Major fundraisers are being designed and the Board is in place. As soon as the last of the legal details are worked out, the Crossings Foundation will start fund raising. No longer will a child be denied services due to monetary or eligibility constraints. The Crossings Foundation marks a pivotal moment in the programs development. It will become the stepping-stone to accepting children from throughout the Lower 48.



Crossings Wilderness Expeditions for Youth

Conclusions

CWEY is Alaska's only true Wilderness Therapy program. Since its inception, it has developed in a manner that has set it apart from other programs, in terms of program design, staffing, risk management, and therapeutic emphasis. The program has been recognized for excellence in program development and delivery, but also, for ensuring that we are a positive addition to the national wilderness therapy delivery model.

Wilderness therapy is becoming an accepted model for dealing with youth with mental health issues. A well-run program can have a significant impact on participants, with long-term effect on children's lives.



Wrangell Community Services is a dynamic organization dedicated to the development of quality programs for all Alaskans. The state is ready for home grown programs that meet the diverse cultural needs of our children.

With the diversion of children from long-term residential programs the state can realize significant savings, and keep valuable funds in the local economy.

We are proud of CWEY and it has become a bright economic light in a community that has felt the down turn in the nation's economy.

Thank you for reviewing our material and please feel free to contact us regarding the program.



ADOPTED AUGUST 1872

January 29, 2004

CITY of WRANGELL, ALASKA

INCORPORATED JUNE 15, 1903

BOX 531, 99929 (907) 874-2381
 FAX: (907) 874-3952

JAN 29 2004

Representative Peggy Wilson
 State Capitol
 Room 104
 Juneau, AK 99801-1182

Dear Representative Wilson:

I am writing this letter on behalf of the community of Wrangell in full support of Wrangell Community Services mental health programs. The facility and its services are critical to not only the social health of our community, but with approximately 60 employees, is one of our largest employers. They target key areas of need within our community, including youth services through their innovative and effective Crossings program.

Crossings is a journey of discovery and growth. It is a wilderness expedition for young men and women 13-18 years of age. The expeditions are a backdrop for intense personal development. The program is an alternative to sending kids out-of-state for mental health programming. The program is designed to benefit young men and women who may be abusing substances, dealing with low self-esteem or having trouble in school, hanging with the wrong crowd or be struggling with depression.

The City supports Crossings efforts and their work with our youth. We encourage the State to assist programs like this. It will benefit our communities, our citizens and our youth.

Sincerely,

Robert S. Prunella
 City Manager



ADOPTED AUGUST 1972

January 29, 2004

CITY of WRANGELL, ALASKA

INCORPORATED JUNE 15, 1903

BOX 531, 99929 (907) 874-2381
FAX: (907) 874-3952

Steve Prysunka, Director
Crossings Wilderness Expeditions for Youth
P.O. Box 1615
Wrangell, AK 99929

Dear Steve:

Thank you for your update on the Crossings Program at the last City Council meeting.

I had the good fortune to be in the audience when you made your initial report to the City Council several years ago when Fern Neimeyer was Mayor.

Your presentation at that time was dynamic and filled with potential promise. It was a pleasure to have an update from your organization and see not only the promise fulfilled, but exceeded.

In reviewing the material that you are sharing with the Alaskan Medicaid Medicare Committee, I would like to express support of the congruence of the message of purpose that you have so finely articulated and what both you and your staff genuinely achieve. Your investment of energies is greatly appreciated. The youth of this community and of this State are Alaska's greatest natural resource.

Please keep our council and community updated as you expand your program.

Respectfully,

Valery McCandless, serving as Mayor
Valery McCandless,
serving as Mayor