

## DIVISION of

# Alaska Pioneer Homes

### MISSION:

*... to provide quality assisted living in a safe home environment.*



*Virginia Smiley, Alaska Pioneer Homes Division Director.*

*“While preserving dignity and individuality, the Pioneer Homes are committed to providing a safe and compassionate environment to residents, with a focus on people’s abilities and potential for personal growth.”*

*—Virginia Smiley,  
Director*

Since the earliest territorial days, Alaska has tried to provide care for residents over age 65. As chronicled by Ketchikan writer June Allen, a 1913 bill established the first pioneer home “for indigent prospectors and others who have spent their years in Alaska and have become dependent.”

While the frontier Gold Rush atmosphere of Alaska has transformed to a modern, 21st-century state, care for old-timers has remained a constant.

The **Division of Alaska Pioneer Homes** provides an assisted living setting and prescription services to seniors in pioneers’ homes in Sitka, Fairbanks, Anchorage, Ketchikan, Palmer and Juneau. The services are designed to maximize independence and quality of life by addressing the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of pioneers’ home residents. These needs are addressed by qualified, caring and experienced staff in a continuum of services within an assisted living philosophy for all residents, from the semi-independent to those with Alzheimer’s disease and related disorders.

Recent accomplishments include successfully billing Medicaid for qualified

residents in all the homes, which relieves the state’s financial obligation by tapping into available federal funds, and gaining passage of state and federal legislation authorizing the conversion of the Palmer Pioneer Home to a state veterans’ home. Meeting the federal criteria for an “approved” veterans’ home allows partial reimbursement from the Department of Veterans Affairs for the care of Alaska veterans. Groundbreaking was held in August 2005 for the remodeling of the current facility, which will be renamed the Alaska Veterans and Pioneers Home, with occupancy planned for summer 2006.

The Pioneer Home system is also proud of its achievement in successfully recruiting and retaining health care personnel in a time of national shortage of health care professionals. One certified nurse aide position was added in each of the Fairbanks, Ketchikan and Juneau homes to assure resident safety is optimized. The ongoing goal is to provide the safest possible assisted living environment for eligible Alaska seniors and increase safety rate for residents who are in danger of falling. The average age of Pioneer Home residents is 84.5 years.

## Accomplishments 2003-05

### Highlights

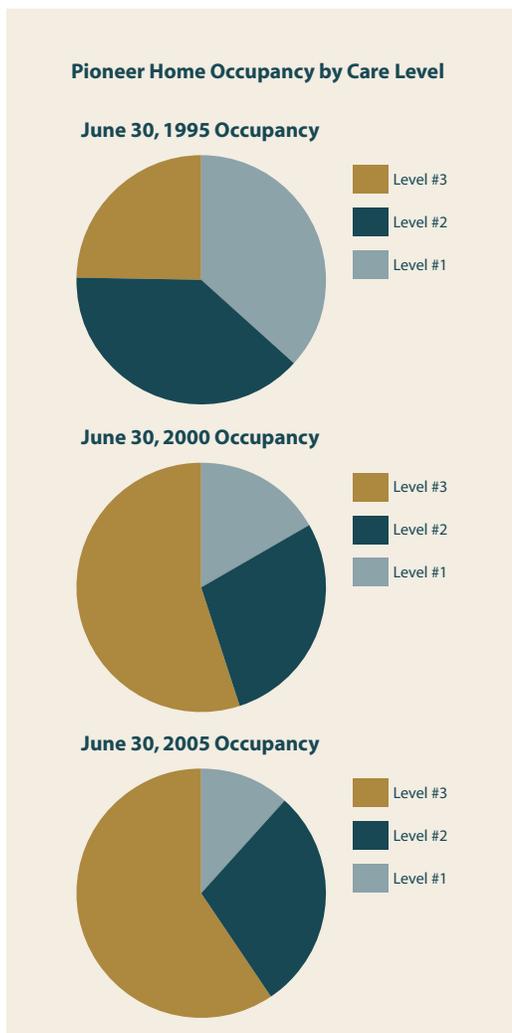
- Converted the Alaska Senior Assistance Program into the Alaska SeniorCare Program to provide payments and pharmaceutical support to more than 6,800 seniors.
- Successfully recruited and maintained adequate health care personnel in a time of national shortage of health care professionals.
- Managed the Quality Assurance Program to ensure safe and best practices in the healthcare field.

## What we continue to work on

The Alaska Pioneer Home system's greatest challenges are to continue delivery of cost-efficient services to all residents, and reduce the vacancy rate in the lowest (least required assistance) level of care. In the last decade, overall occupancy of the homes decreased from 95 percent to 75.5 percent, with the majority of vacancies in the lowest level of care. Many seniors today choose to remain in their own homes because of available community support services. However, by providing an option for seniors to live independently, our goal is to achieve 80-percent occupancy for Level I, which provides only housing, meals, emergency assistance and opportunities for recreation.

In the area of cost-efficiency, we continue to help eligible residents file for Medicaid. The Pioneer Homes are primarily funded by resident payments and the general fund. However, a recent change in federal law and department policy allows residents to receive Medicaid benefits and the homes to be licensed as Medicaid providers. This will greatly assist some seniors, who have wanted to live in a pioneer home but who felt their resources were not enough, to make the decision to apply.

Another goal is to use the new Alaska Veterans and Pioneer Home in Palmer as an opportunity to reach out to the Matanuska-Susitna veteran organizations, such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and invite them to become involved with the home. This untapped support system in the Valley can help the Palmer home become well-integrated into the surrounding community as a center for veterans' activities.



## Sitka social worker becomes Medicaid expert to help residents

*“The Medicaid Waiver process can be a challenge to those who require nursing home level of care. Klaudia is a role model for social workers and care coordinators on how to navigate the Medicaid Waiver application process.”*

—Georgina E. Dapcevich,  
Sitka Pioneer Home  
Administrator

Sitka Pioneer Home resident Rose Marvin needed knee replacement surgery, but the cost was beyond what she could handle. Coming to the rescue was social worker Klaudia Leccese, who has become something of an expert on Medicaid and Medicaid eligibility.

“Rose didn’t have much in the way of spare change,” Leccese says. “And she needed the insurance for her medical needs.” Leccese, a Social Worker III, has been with the Alaska Pioneer Home system since October 2002. Before that, she worked at Sitka SouthEast Alaska Regional Health Consortium for 13 years, where she first began to educate herself about Medicaid.

Leccese’s motivation isn’t a simple fascination with federal rules, regulations and bureaucracy. Her goal is to help people like Rose Marvin get the services they need. With assistance from Alaska Legal Services in Juneau, Leccese helped Marvin set up a “Miller” trust, which allows people whose monthly income exceeds the Medicaid cap to divert their income into an irrevocable trust. The money in that trust, above what is allowed to qualify for Medicaid, goes back to the state and pays for some of the services, while preserving Medicaid eligibility.

As a result, Medicaid covered Marvin’s trip to Juneau for the surgery, her hospitalization, and her travel back to Sitka. There, Leccese coordinated with Sitka Community Hospital for the woman to receive short-term care while undergoing physical therapy. When Marvin eventually returned to the pioneers’ home, she was able to resume her previous independent level of care.

Since July 2004, when residents were first allowed to receive Medicaid, Leccese has taken it upon herself to assess Medicaid eligibility for all of the Sitka Pioneer Home residents whose status was in doubt. “I got a list of everyone on payment assistance,” she explains, “and from there I determined who might qualify.”

She selected five or six at a time, initiated the applications, followed up, then moved to the next five or six. So far, she has about a 30-percent success rate in helping qualified residents get Medicaid Waiver coverage, which covers some of their costs, including staff care, doctor visits, medical equipment and prescriptions.

Leccese says anything that saves money means the home may be able to offer more to its residents. Another resident, for example, needed a medication that cost \$1,700 a month. Leccese was able to find some free medication through a medication assistance program.

“The Medicaid Waiver process can be a challenge to those who require nursing home level of care,” says Leccese’s supervisor Georgina E. Dapcevich. “Klaudia is a role model for social workers and care coordinators on how to navigate the Medicaid Waiver application process.”

“People at this stage are losing — they’re losing their mobility, losing their sight, losing their friends, losing a lot of things,” Leccese says. “I’m not half-hearted ... I guess I’m excited about my job. I love the residents and I love to help.”



Sitka Pioneer Home resident Rose Marvin, left, was able to get a knee replacement paid through Medicaid with help from Klaudia Leccese, a state social worker shown at right.