

The Alaska Department  
of Health and Social  
Services

Division of Health Care Services

Health Planning and Systems Development Section

<http://www.hss.state.ak.us/dph/healthplanning>

### Letter from the Section Chief

For most Alaskans spring signals the onset of warmer weather, longer days, and the promise of summer returning to the northern regions. For many it brings opportunities for wealth and abundance in Alaska's seasonal industries such as commercial fishing and tourism. Unfortunately for some communities, however, especially along the Yukon River, spring has brought destructive flooding as ice jams have forced the river over its banks. Gov. Sarah Palin has issued a disaster declaration for areas of interior Alaska. This serves as a reminder that in Alaska it is nature that makes the final determination. But as in every disaster, Alaskans are ready to respond to the needs of others.

In this issue of "Healthy Planning" we are focusing on the work of the Alaska Office of Rural Health. It is through this office that the Health Planning and Systems Development Section makes its outreach to the needs of rural Alaskans. The Alaska Office of Rural Health

# Healthy Planning

*The newsletter of the  
Health Planning and  
Systems Development  
Section*

*Spring/Summer 2009*



Eagle Beach north of Juneau, photo by Alice Rarig

### Welcome...

Here's the second issue of Healthy Planning. In this and subsequent issues we will be featuring some of the programs and projects of the Health Planning and Systems Development Section. Think of us as a tiny office tucked into a 1950s era office building in the Southeast panhandle city of Juneau, with a component in Anchorage. Spreading out to the north and west of us is mostly rural Alaska, comprised largely of small towns and villages composed of various peoples, cultures, industries and ethnic groups.

Assuring a high standard of health care in those often remote locations is the mission of this office. Through the work of this office, as well as other agencies and organizations with an interest in public health, we create and maintain a network of services and opportunities intended to improve health care throughout the state.

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works to provide vital information to health care providers, the recruitment and retention of health care providers, and provides technical assistance to rural providers, hospitals, and communities. I hope you enjoy this issue of our newsletter and have a great summer!

Patricia Carr, Chief  
Health Planning and Systems Development  
Section  
Director, Alaska Office of Rural Health

- [Upcoming Events](#)

Within the Health Planning and Systems Development Section we provide grants for Community Health Aide training, as well as staff the Alaska Primary Care Office and the Certificate of Need Program. Other programs managed by the Section include the Comprehensive Integrated Mental Health Plan, the Frontier Extended Stay Clinics, the Hospital Discharge Data System, Rural Hospital Flexibility, and Small Hospital Improvement.

### [A Mission of Service to All Rural Alaskans](#)



Chignik Village in Summer  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Alaska Image Library

Quite often effective access to health care in Alaska's rural communities means quick access to information. This is one of the primary missions of The Alaska Office of Rural Health (AORH), which collects and disseminates information on rural health care issues to patients and health care providers. The AORH also researches innovative approaches to the delivery and financing of quality health care in rural Alaska.

The AORH provides information on funding opportunities, changes in medical protocols and procedures, new and recalled pharmaceuticals, recent developments in emerging infectious disease and general health information. Funding opportunities have been one of the major thrusts of this research providing financial stability to our rural health providers. Often, our health care providers are far too occupied in providing daily medical care to be aware of emerging opportunities available to them. It is the primary task of the AORH to keep them abreast of the great variety of developments in rural health.

AORH staff gathers health information for the rural health patients and providers through the daily review of such Web sites as Medscape Today, The Doctor's Office, Health Consumer, and the Informed Patient. The [Rural Assistance Center](#) is another very rich resource of health information specifically focused on rural health issues providing a variety of sources for funding ranging from governmental to foundation sources. The [Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services](#) issue almost daily releases regarding new policies and procedures as well as a great variety of monthly CMS Open



Bettles and the Koyukuk River  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Alaska Image Library



Egegik Village on the Alaskan Peninsula  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Alaska Image Library

Forums on rural health; physician and nursing care issues, and regulation changes to list just a few of the many provided by this federal agency. It would be an oversight not to mention the Centers for Disease and Prevention Control ([CDC](#)), which provides a great variety of services and information for rural health providers.

Specific research requests are often received from rural health agencies and timely research is rendered expanding the scope of work conducted by the Alaska State Office of Rural Health. Flexibility has been one of the hallmarks of the AORH in rendering viable information to rural Alaska health agencies.

The Alaska Office of Rural Health has a mission of service to insure adequate quality health care to all rural Alaskans.

For more information visit the [Alaska Office of Rural Health](#) Web site.

### **Hospital to Hospital Mentoring Program**

Workforce development issues are common to all rural health-care facilities in general and Alaska facilities in particular. The Hospital to Hospital Mentoring Program provides a unique opportunity for facilities to discover and share best practices in a wide array of health-care delivery modalities.

The mentoring program was created last year as a collaboration between the Health Planning and Systems Development Section and the Alaska Small Hospital Performance Improvement Network ([ASHPIN](#)). This workforce development program

is a true quality improvement initiative that benefits both the hosting facility and the traveling facility by creating a venue for exceptional staff to share their experiences and lessons learned with staff from other facilities who are struggling with similar issues. The mentoring experience has the potential to improve staff confidence and clinical competency, improve health-care delivery systems, improve cost accounting/billing procedures, and ultimately improve overall sustainability of participating facilities through staff development utilizing a “grow your own” approach.

Typically, facilities apply to the Section for mentoring opportunities. Over the past year communities including Seward, Valdez, Petersburg, Sitka, and Kodiak have participated in the mentoring program, exchanging information in a variety of areas; including swing bed programs, triage nursing duties, a medical assistant training program, health information systems, medical record management, billing procedures, respiratory therapy, and hospital quality improvement.

Post trip evaluations have been overwhelmingly positive and supportive of continuing the hospital to hospital mentoring program. Rural Alaska hospital staff from a variety of professional disciplines have benefited by spending time with experienced staff in hospitals that share the unique circumstances of health-care delivery in Alaska communities. Participants report that this program has provided them the opportunity to share knowledge and experience of “best practices” which has proven quite helpful in the development of sustainable health-care programs, medical records management, and billing practices specific to critical access hospitals.

Future participants are encouraged to engage with mentoring partners early on to develop a detailed list of objectives for each trip prior to traveling. Improved planning of mentoring objectives will help both participating parties stay on track to maximize efficiency of the time spent during the mentoring experience.

### The National Health Service Corps

The federal Health Resources and Services Administration has just announced a new funding cycle for the National Health Service Corps ([NHSC](#)) that will provide additional funds to improve health care for underserved Alaskans. The funds, available from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, will be used for loan repayment awards for new NHSC loan repayment applications.



Keri Gibson, a medical student intern, stands in front of her post at the Iliuliuk clinic.

Typically, applicants for the NHSC are students who qualify as scholars through an application process, or graduates who find themselves in need of loan repayment options. This money will allow the NHSC to recruit more scholars as well as enable more potential loan re-payers to pay off their student loans. Sites within Alaska must apply through the Alaska Primary Care Office to qualify to recruit a scholar or loan repayer.

Corps members provide primary medical care, mental health, and dental services in areas designated to have shortages of health services providers. The loan repayment cycle will begin in June, 2009, and run through September 30, 2010. Applications will be received on a rolling basis rather than during one open application period.

To be assigned Corps personnel, health provider sites must have a current health provider shortage area (HPSA) designation from the NHSC, which provides scholarships to health professions students, and loan repayment awards to health professionals in exchange for at least two years of service in one of the shortage areas. The [Alaska Primary Care Office](#) submits health professional shortage area applications to the Federal government. The Bureau of Health Professions [Shortage Designation Branch](#) approves and determines the score for each site.

For Alaska this opportunity applies to health centers throughout the state. For a list of the areas currently approved to receive Corps members go to <http://nhscjobs.hrsa.gov/>.

### **Community Health Aide Training and Supervision Grants**



The Community Health Aide Training and Supervision Grants (CHATS) Program, administered by the Alaska Office of Rural Health within the Health Planning and Systems Development Section, funds training and supervision of primary community health aides who provide health care services in rural communities throughout Alaska. Funding is channeled through a grant program available to qualified communities and nonprofit corporations. A representative of the Alaska Office of Rural Health is appointed to the Community Health Aide Certification Board and participates in the Community Health Aide Program Director's Association. Faith Allard carries this function for the AORH.

Because of Alaska's geography and cultural diversity, innovative measures are



Kiana Clinic with "Taxi service." Photos by Alice Rarig

required to bring health care to remote communities. Rural clinics like the Kiana Clinic pictured at left, receive CHATS training through a parent organization. In this case it is Maniilaq Association in Kotzebue. Community Health Aides provide primary care to rural Alaskans, who may then need to be referred to larger facilities.

The CHATS program is the first point of contact with the Alaska Tribal Health System for approximately 50,000 Alaska Natives and comprises a network of approximately 550 Community Health Aides/Practitioners in over 180 remote Alaska communities. Community Health Aides, working in small community clinics, provide health care under the general supervision of physicians at regional hospitals.

Community Health Aides are selected by their communities and receive training at centers located in Anchorage, Bethel, Nome and Sitka. Between training sessions – there are four that last three to four weeks -- the CHAs work in their community clinics.

#### **HPSD Receives Dental Workforce Grant**

The Health Planning and Systems Development Section has taken another step toward developing an adequate dental health workforce in Alaska.

The Section has received a grant from the Rasmuson Foundation to develop options for state-sponsored dental support-for-service programs (SFSPs) in Alaska. The \$25,000 grant will be used to fund a contract to determine what approach Alaska as well as other states have taken to developing loan repayment programs; facilitate meetings among Alaska stakeholders like the Alaska Dental Action Coalition; and propose options for SFSPs.

This grant is just one aspect of HPSD's ongoing effort in health workforce planning and development in its mission to strengthen health care systems in Alaska, especially for rural, low income and other underserved populations. The State Oral Health Program is also a partner in this project.

The purpose of this grant is to address Alaska's severe disadvantage in competing in the national dental health-care labor market. Currently the state has high dental vacancy rates and increasing recruitment costs. A recent Health Care Vacancy Study reported that there were 71 vacancies for dentists in Alaska.

When Robert isn't working to improve health care for underserved Alaskans, he hosts a jazz show at the local FM radio station.



### Something Fishy about Robert Sewell

We always knew there was something fishy about Robert Sewell, Ph.D., a health program manager in the Health Planning and Systems Development Section where he keeps a lot of irons in the fire. But now all doubts have been removed. This year at the Alaska Primary Care Association Annual Awards he received the Coho Award. The awards, all named for species of salmon and trout, are given to recognize contributions to the support of primary care in Alaska, especially for the underserved. “These contributions and support may be demonstrated through work with the Association, Alaska’s communities, her community health centers, other safety net providers and/or of similar vision and mission,” the Association stated in a release. The Coho Award is given for an initiative or best practices that supports or optimizes access, delivery, services and/or outcomes in Alaska. This year the award, presented at the annual meeting of the Alaska Primary Care Association on May 18 in Anchorage, recognized Robert’s work on the Health Care Professions Loan Repayment and Incentive Program. Well done, Robert!

### Featured References

The Health Resources and Services Administration [Geospatial Data Warehouse](#) (HGDW) has unveiled its revised Web site. The redesigned Web site provides a wide scope of information including data on HRSA, quick access to reports and maps, community fact sheets, county and state profiles, downloadable data, data on current field strength, health professional shortage areas, and locator tools.

### Upcoming Events

The [13<sup>th</sup> Annual 340B Coalition Conference](#), July 13-15, 2009, at the Omni Shoreham Hotel, Washington, DC.

Save the Date! National Health Services Corps Annual Scholars Conference, August 13-15, 2009, in Tampa, Fla. For more information check back at the [NHSC Web site](#).

The 2009 Medication Use in Rural America Conference will be held September 9-11 at the Westin Crown Center Hotel in Kansas City, Mo. For updates and further information check the [National Rural Health Association](#) Web site.

The [2009 Alaska Workforce Development Conference](#) focusing on Health and Behavioral Health Workforce Needs, will be held on September 21-22, 2009, at the

Marriott Anchorage Downtown



Killer whales in waters near Juneau. Photo by Judy Mason.