

# Alaska Health Systems Collaboration Unit



Connecting Alaskans to  
new and improved services for better health



## FY2023 Annual Report



## Overview

In Alaska, 3 out of 4 adults (73%) live with a chronic disease or related behavior or condition that increases their chances of developing a chronic disease, like smoking or having high cholesterol.<sup>1</sup> These ongoing chronic diseases include heart, lung, and kidney disease; stroke; cancer; diabetes; asthma; arthritis; and obesity. Two of these diseases — cancer and heart disease — are the leading, often preventable causes of death in Alaska.<sup>2</sup>

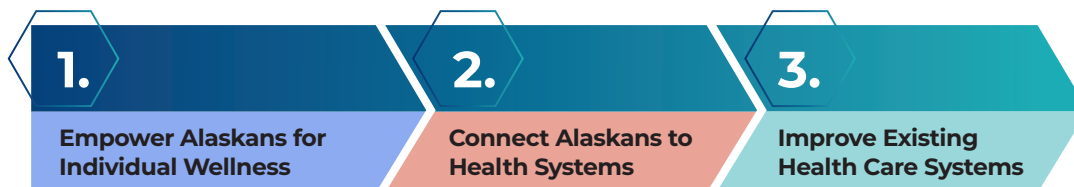
Symptoms of chronic diseases can last for years and often do not go away completely. They significantly reduce quality of life and financial stability for people experiencing them. Chronic diseases also strain the health care system by imposing a significant, long-term cost for continued care and management of symptoms. Total spending on Medicaid services in Alaska was \$2.12 billion in 2020.<sup>3</sup> Nearly 80% of that amount covered services for individuals with a chronic disease. For each Alaskan living with one or more chronic diseases, the average annual Medicaid cost reaches \$32,643. For each Alaskan without a chronic disease, the average annual Medicaid cost is 10 times less: \$3,146.<sup>3</sup>

Alaska's Health Systems Collaboration Unit (HSC) runs four programs to improve the prevention and management of chronic diseases that affect most adults in every region of Alaska.



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HSC is within the [Alaska Department of Health, Division of Public Health, Section of Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion](#) (CDPHP). The HSC unit has three main goals to improve the health of Alaskans:



This Fiscal Year 23 (FY23) Annual Report demonstrates how the HSC unit met those goals related to preventing and better managing heart disease and stroke, diabetes, and cancer. It introduces the unit's new dementia program and its accomplishments, barriers, and recommended priorities. The report also shares the success of the new [Fresh Start campaign](#) to significantly increase enrollments in free, proven programs that support Alaska adults to lose weight, prevent and manage diabetes, lower blood pressure, and stop smoking and vaping. For more background, please read the unit's [2024-2029 Strategic Plan](#).<sup>4</sup>



## Diabetes Prevention and Control Program

### About the Program

Alaska's [Diabetes Prevention and Control Program](#) focuses on preventing and managing diabetes. It supports a statewide network of proven programs and resources to prevent type 2 diabetes, as well as prevent and delay health complications for people diagnosed with diabetes.

Having diabetes means someone's body doesn't make enough insulin or can't use it well. When that happens, too much blood sugar stays in the bloodstream. Over time, diabetes can lead to serious health problems, including heart disease, chronic kidney disease, nerve damage, amputations, and hearing or vision loss. In Alaska, 8% of adults live with diabetes.<sup>5</sup> A similar percentage of adults in all public health regions across the state live with prediabetes and diabetes. Having prediabetes means blood sugar levels are higher than normal, but not high enough to be diagnosed as diabetes.

### Empower Alaskans for individual wellness

Alaska's Diabetes Prevention and Control Program has achieved statewide reach of proven National Diabetes Prevention Programs (DPPs) and Diabetes Self-Management Education and Support (DSMES) programs. It works with partners and contractors so that Alaskans can do these programs in the way that works best: in-person in some communities or online for adults living anywhere in the state.

The number of in-person DPPs has increased to 11 statewide. Despite the challenges from the pandemic, these in-person programs have served over 500 Alaskans since 2019. The number of Alaska adults who participated in a [free online program to lose weight and prevent diabetes](#) increased from 183 in 2022 to 1,083 in 2023 following the launch of Alaska's [Fresh Start campaign](#).<sup>6</sup> The Fresh Start campaign launched in late December 2022 to promote free online health improvement programs for adults statewide.

These DPPs help Alaskans facing higher chances of developing type 2 diabetes prevent or delay the disease by losing a modest amount of weight, as little as 5%, through improved nutrition and increased physical activity.<sup>7</sup> To date, participating Alaskans have lost a total of more than 11,000 pounds through the online Diabetes Prevention Program.<sup>6</sup> In national studies, individuals who completed a DPP lowered their chances of developing type 2 diabetes by 58% compared with participants who took a placebo (a pill without medicine) even three years after completing the program.<sup>8</sup> Nationally, these DPPs were effective for all participating racial and ethnic groups and both men and women.<sup>8</sup>

Since 2019, 2,482 Alaskans have participated in in-person Diabetes Self-Management Education and Support (DSMES) programs. The number of Alaska adults who participated in a [free online program to manage diabetes](#) increased from 33 in 2022 to 219 in 2023 following the launch of Alaska's [Fresh Start campaign](#).<sup>6</sup> Participating in DSMES is associated with lower A1C (a blood test measuring blood sugar), lower self-reported body weight, improved quality of life, reduced risk of death from any cause, and reduced health care costs.<sup>9</sup>



## Diabetes Prevention and Control Program (continued)

### Connect Alaskans to health systems

Alaska's Diabetes Prevention and Control Program invested in a pilot project for doctors' offices that automates and improves electronic referral of patients to more health services when they're needed. During a doctor's appointment, this electronic referral system connects patients with other health care providers and resources to meet identified health goals, such as proven services to help quit smoking or vaping. Without additional work from the clinical staff, automatic referrals address a patient's need for more care along with factors that affect that patient's overall health. Those factors consider where patients live, learn and work, along with income, education, access to health care, and more.



*There are 13 in-person diabetes management and prevention programs offered throughout Alaska in Anchorage, Bethel, Fairbanks, Homer, Juneau, Ketchikan, Kodiak, and Soldotna.*

### Improve existing health care systems

Alaska's Diabetes Prevention and Control Program maintains an umbrella license that makes it easier for partners to run recognized DSMES programs that serve Alaskans living in rural and remote locations and facing the highest barriers to health care. Nine of Alaska's 13 available DSMES programs received recognition from the American Diabetes Association through this umbrella license.

Participation in DPP and DSMES has been shown to decrease or delay developing chronic diseases and related health complications, as well as improve use of medication when needed.<sup>10</sup> These improvements lead to significant cost savings for Alaskans and health insurers. At this time, nationally recognized DPP and DSMES programs are not reimbursed by Medicaid in Alaska. This makes it difficult to sustain these effective programs in Alaska and means enrollment costs are a potential barrier for Alaskans who would most benefit.

## Heart Disease and Stroke Prevention Program

### About the Program

In Alaska, heart disease and strokes cause almost 1 out of 3 deaths.<sup>2</sup> About 1 out of 3 (31%) adults have been diagnosed with high blood pressure.<sup>1</sup> Many more adults have high blood pressure and don't know it. Alaska's Heart Disease and Stroke Program focuses on improving screening for high blood pressure or high cholesterol, which often don't have symptoms. Lowering blood pressure and cholesterol can improve heart and brain health. This saves lives and reduces costly medical care.

### Empower Alaskans for individual wellness

[Alaska's Heart Disease and Stroke Program](#) has achieved statewide reach of proven Self-Measured Blood Pressure (SMBP) programs. It worked with partners and contractors so Alaskans can do these programs in the way that works best for them: in-person in some communities or online for adults statewide.

During FY23, Alaska's Heart Disease and Stroke Program added eight new locations offering in-person SMBP programs, bringing the statewide total to about 30. The number of Alaska adults who participated in a [free online program to lower blood pressure](#) increased from 155 in 2022 to 902 in 2023 following the launch of Alaska's [Fresh Start campaign](#) (147 of the 902 participants in 2023 are also enrolled in the online diabetes management program).<sup>6</sup>

A recent survey conducted by Alaska's Heart Disease and Stroke Prevention Program showed positive outcomes for adults enrolled in SMBP programs. In addition to improved health for many Alaskans, the survey's results suggest that the return on investment of a statewide SMBP program could be \$1 million or more annually.<sup>11</sup> As one example, the contractor providing the state's online SMBP monitored outcomes for Alaskans who participated for months in a row and consistently had their first measurement of blood pressure (called systolic) at 140 or higher. On average, those Alaskans lowered their systolic blood pressure by 12 points.<sup>6</sup> Studies show that reducing systolic blood pressure by 10 points significantly lowers someone's chances of stroke, heart disease, heart failure and all causes of death.<sup>12</sup>

### Connect Alaskans to health systems

Alaska's Heart Disease and Stroke Program supports statewide and community partners to promote healthy places where Alaskans can be active, choose nutritious foods and drinks, and breathe smokefree air. This program has increased partnerships with many communities and community organizations around the state. This has expanded the reach and access to proven SMBP programs to adults living in remote locations and communities of people who could benefit most from these programs. These communities include Alaskans with lower incomes, Black Alaskan adults and Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander adults who are disproportionately affected by heart disease and stroke.

### Improve existing health care systems

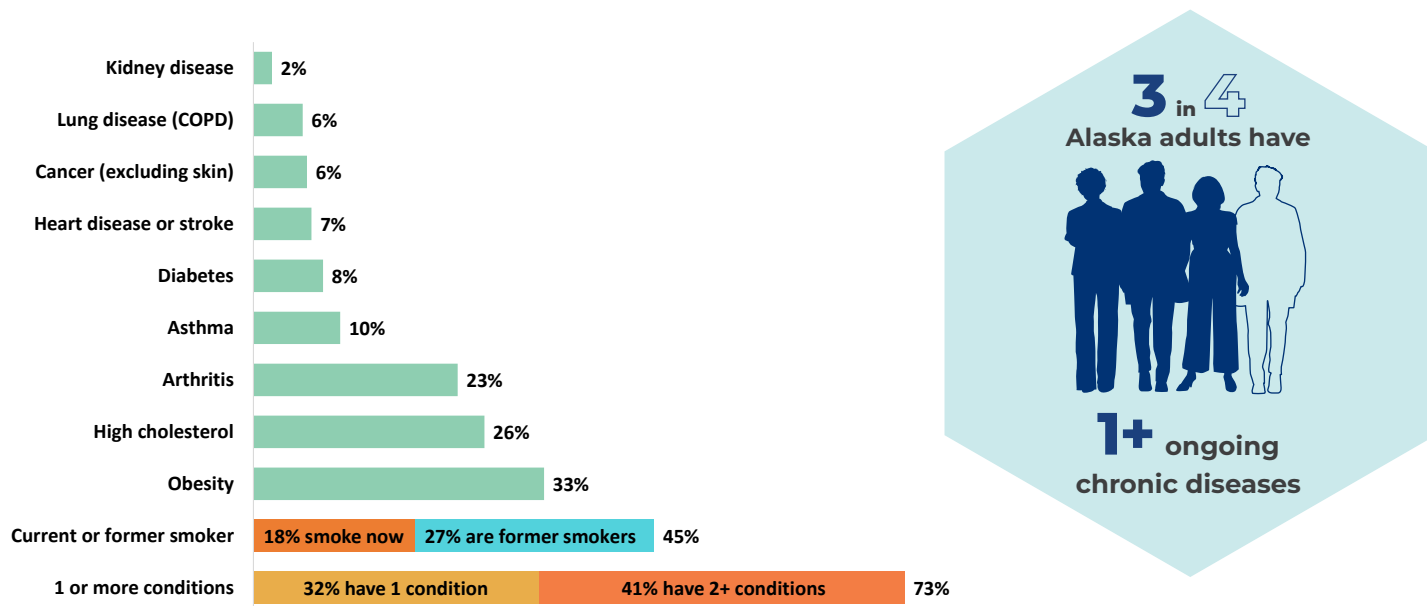
Alaska's Heart Disease and Stroke Program supports health care providers to improve screening and management of high blood pressure and ensure optimal treatment for heart disease and strokes. It has strengthened its partnership with the American Heart Association, which has provided more support to clinics, centers, and other organizations offering SMBP programs to Alaskans.

One out of three people enrolled in Medicaid has high blood pressure.<sup>13</sup> The cost of uncontrolled blood pressure ranges from \$5,000 to \$19,000 annually per person. Nationally recognized SMBP programs are not fully reimbursed by Medicaid.<sup>13</sup> This makes it difficult to sustain these effective programs in Alaska and means enrollment costs are a potential barrier for those who would most benefit. Medicaid reimbursement for SMBP would reduce the burden of high blood pressure for more Alaskans.<sup>13</sup>



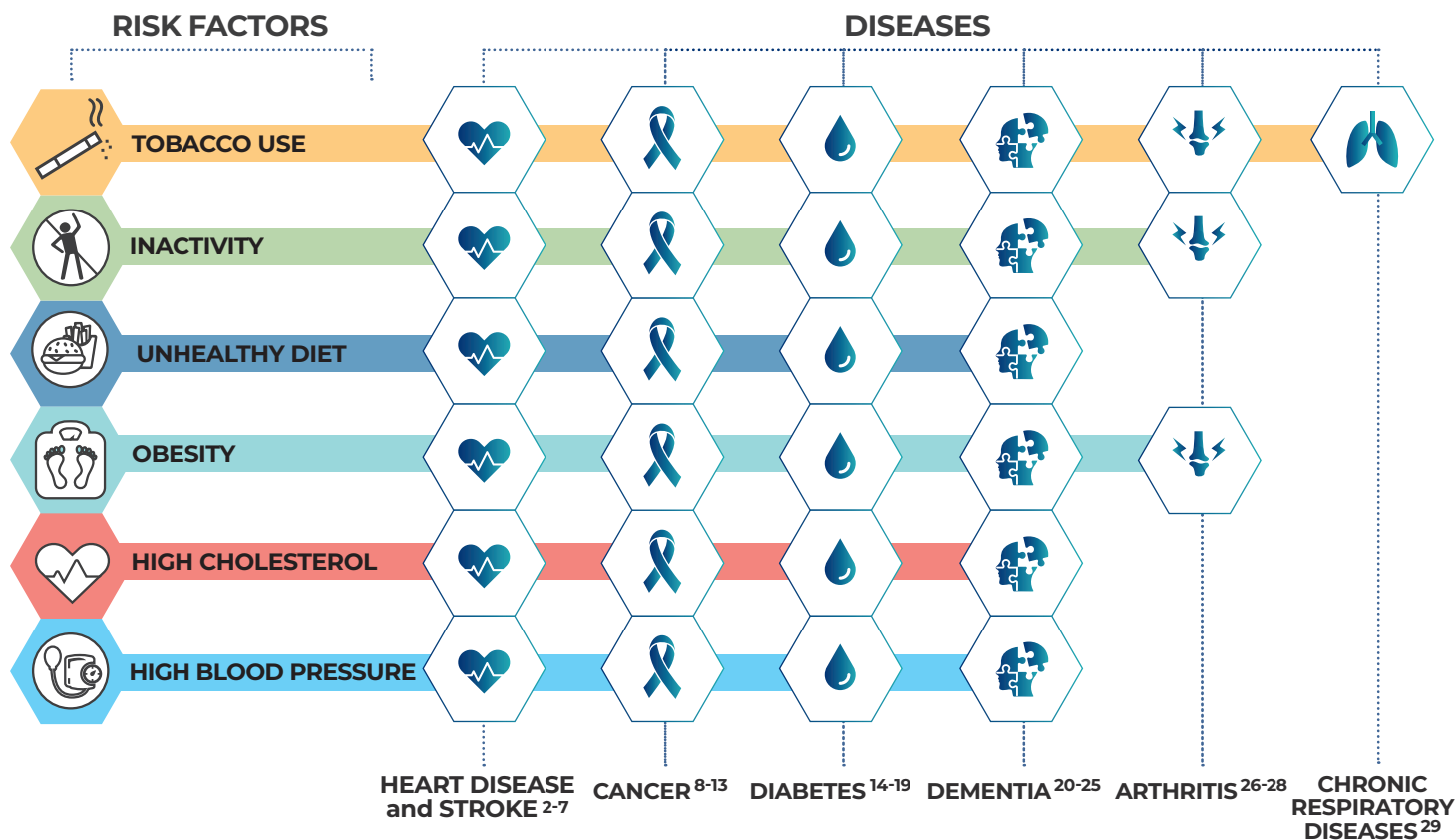
## THE PROBLEM: Most Alaskans live with a chronic disease

Nearly **three out of four Alaska adults** have at least one ongoing chronic disease, condition or related behavior like smoking. Many of these health concerns are connected, with 41% of Alaska adults having two or more of these concerns at the same time.<sup>1</sup>



Tobacco use, inactivity, unhealthy diet and other **preventable risk factors** can cause more than one ongoing chronic disease.

The below **six risk factors are linked to one or more chronic disease.**



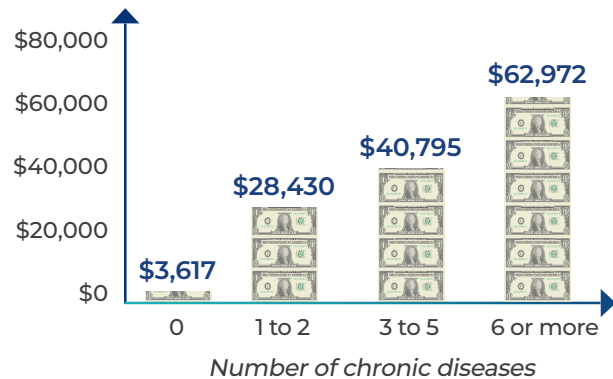
## THE COST: To Alaska

An adult living with one or more chronic diseases is much more likely to visit the emergency room, need hospital care, and pay significantly higher health care costs than an adult without chronic diseases.<sup>30</sup> The more chronic diseases that an Alaska adult has, the higher that adult's health care costs will be each year.



In Alaska, 76 cents of every dollar spent on Medicaid services treats 25% of Medicaid recipients with chronic diseases.<sup>31</sup>

Average annual spending per Medicaid recipient, by number of chronic diseases, FY 2022<sup>31</sup>



## THE SOLUTION: Key changes to prevent and manage chronic diseases

**Four healthy behaviors**—never smoking, being physically active, following a healthy diet, and maintaining a healthy weight—are linked to as much as an 80% reduction in the chances of developing the most common and deadly chronic diseases.<sup>32</sup>

Make the following healthy changes to help prevent or to improve ongoing chronic diseases:

- 1** Quit smoking or don't start
- 2** Be active every day
- 3** Eat fruits and vegetables and limit sugary drinks
- 4** Maintain a healthy weight

## WHAT CAN WE DO? Communities working together to improve health

**Public health professionals:** Promote positive changes that help people stay healthy.

**Work** with communities to improve the places where people live, work, and play to empower Alaskans to be as healthy as possible.

**Health care providers:** Screen for chronic diseases and educate Alaskans about risk factors.

**Improve** overall health by coordinating care with other providers and community organizations.

**Promote** positive health changes and refer patients to chronic disease prevention and management programs in your community or online at [freshstart.alaska.gov](https://freshstart.alaska.gov).

**Individuals:** Prioritize the four healthy behaviors discussed above.

Visit [freshstart.alaska.gov](https://freshstart.alaska.gov) to find a program to help.

## Comprehensive Cancer Control Program

### About the Program

[Alaska's Comprehensive Cancer Control Program](#) focuses on supporting behaviors that protect against cancer, detecting cancer at its earliest stages, improving access to the best treatment available, and improving quality of life after a cancer diagnosis. In Alaska, cancer has been the leading cause of death since 1994.<sup>14-19</sup> Every year, more than 2,000 Alaskans are diagnosed with cancer, and there are an estimated 38,000 cancer survivors living in Alaska.<sup>20, 21</sup>

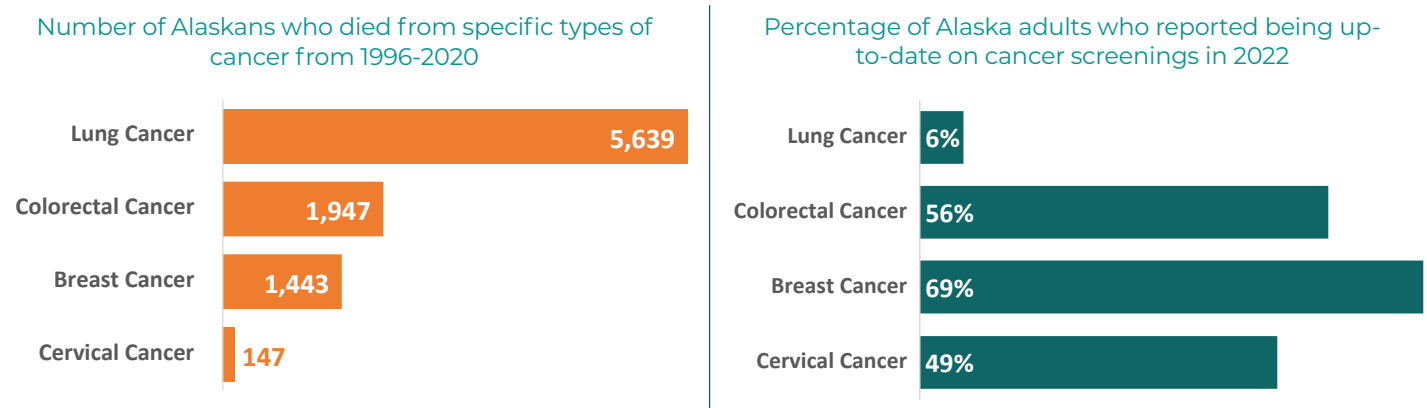
### Empower Alaskans for individual wellness

During and after cancer treatment, a survivor's needs change. A survey among Alaska survivors showed their greatest unmet needs were related to emotional and relationship issues following cancer diagnosis and treatment.<sup>22</sup> Alaska's Comprehensive Cancer Control Program responded by partnering with 15 community-based nonprofits across the state to generate and connect a network of support resources, events, classes, and programs for survivors and their loved ones as they seek wellness after cancer.

### Connect Alaskans to health systems

Diagnosing a cancer early often leads to better health outcomes, improves quality of life after cancer, and saves money. The annual cost to treat cancer in Alaska exceeds \$200 million.<sup>23</sup>

#### Screening tests save lives by catching cancer early, yet many Alaskans are not up-to-date on these tests.<sup>24, 25</sup>



The Comprehensive Cancer Control Program partners with community health workers and the Alaska Health Literacy Collaborative to develop clear and simple educational tools to improve Alaskans' understanding of the importance of diagnosing cancer early through screening tests ordered by their health care provider. They also work closely with statewide partners who provide screening to help increase access to and quality of screening.

### Improve existing health care systems

Organizations that screen for and treat cancer are spread across Alaska with different priorities, capabilities, and sources of funding. The Comprehensive Cancer Control Program manages a coalition called the [Alaska Cancer Partnership](#) to help these organizations work together toward common goals, prevent duplication of similar work, and maximize resources and reach to Alaskans. In FY23 through a collaborative campaign within the coalition, the Comprehensive Cancer Control Program partnered with 16 health centers to implement policy and systems changes to increase HPV vaccination coverage among the patients they served. The HPV vaccination, given at ages 9-12, prevents six types of cancer in adulthood.



## Dementia Education and Prevention Program

### About the Program

The newest program in the Health Systems and Collaborations (HSC) Unit focuses on the prevention, treatment and care of Alaskans with dementia. Dementia is the term for a variety of conditions that cause memory loss and reduce problem-solving and thinking abilities that interfere with daily life. Across the nation, Alaska has the fastest growing population of adults 65 and older.<sup>26</sup> An estimated 10% of Alaska seniors have Alzheimer's disease and related types of dementia.<sup>27</sup> The number of Alaskans with Alzheimer's disease is expected to reach 11,000 in 2025.

The 32nd Alaska Legislature (2021–2022) [passed a bill](#) to create this new program within the Alaska Department of Health.<sup>28</sup> The goal is to strengthen the health department's ability to work with partners to improve understanding of early signs of Alzheimer's disease and other types of dementia. This new program will align the department with the existing work of the Alaska Dementia Action Collaborative. It will focus on health changes people can make to reduce their chances of developing dementia. The program also will improve early diagnosis, treatment and resources for providers and caregivers.

### Accomplishments

During State Fiscal Year 23, the HSC unit created a Program Manager position and hired a manager to write a workplan and application for the CDC's competitive BOLD grant to address Alzheimer's disease and related types of dementia. BOLD is an acronym referring to the federal Building Our Largest Dementia infrastructure for Alzheimer's Act, Public Law 115-406.<sup>29</sup>

In August 2023, Alaska's Dementia Education and Prevention Program staff learned it received Alaska's first BOLD federal grant that funds the following efforts over the next five years:

- **Establishing Public Health Centers of Excellence for Alzheimer's disease and related dementias**
- **Providing funds to support public health departments**
- **Increasing data analysis related to dementia and timely reporting**

### Barriers

The most significant barriers for the new Dementia Education and Prevention Program will be centralizing, analyzing and acting on new and current data about the burden of Alzheimer's disease and other types of dementia in Alaska. Given this is a new program, it has not yet established centralized coordination of data analysis for multiple organizations serving Alaskans with dementia. The Alaska Dementia Action Collaborative has laid the strong foundation for developing this new program.

### Short-term recommendations for priorities in Alaska

Strategies in the new BOLD grant workplan are the short-term priority recommendations for Alaska:

- 1 Educate the public, providers and other professionals about types of dementia and ways to prevent them**
- 2 Increase the availability and use of data to improve knowledge about dementia and meet dementia-focused goals and activities**
- 3 Identify ways to improve electronic referral in health care provider's offices to connect patients to more dementia services in their communities**
- 4 Improve sustainability of dementia-related goals and activities**

## New Fresh Start campaign connects Alaskans with free health programs that work.

In one year, more than 2,000 Alaskans joined programs to prevent and manage chronic diseases.

In late December 2022, the Health Systems Collaboration Unit worked with public health leaders across Alaska's Section of Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (CDPHP) to launch the new [Fresh Start campaign](#). The campaign connects Alaska adults with free, existing programs that help participants make changes to prevent or delay the onset of chronic diseases. Many programs match Alaskans with a coach and health specialists. Many programs can be completed online, over the phone and at any pace.

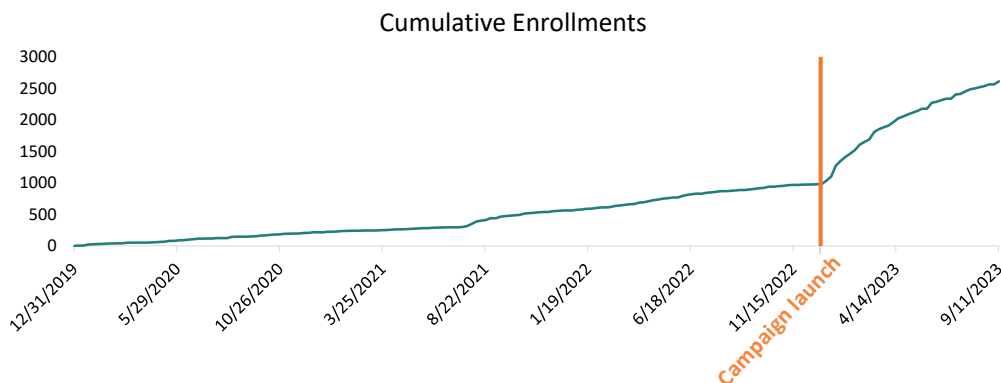
These programs help Alaskans meet many health goals:

- Lose weight
- Lower blood pressure
- Lower blood sugar to prevent or manage diabetes
- Stop smoking, vaping, or chewing tobacco
- Be active with their families

CDPHP has been offering these free programs for years, and they work. The problem was many Alaska adults did not know about them or how to join them. The health improvement programs experienced significant increases in enrollment after the Fresh Start campaign started promoting them. Between December 20, 2022, and December 1, 2023, more than 2,050 Alaska adults enrolled in Fresh Start online programs to lose weight, lower blood pressure, or lower blood sugar to prevent or manage diabetes.<sup>6</sup> That's significantly more Alaskans enrolled in these programs in the first year of the Fresh Start campaign than during the previous three years combined (981 Alaskans enrolled).<sup>6</sup>



## Total enrollment in online programs increased dramatically after the Fresh Start campaign began.



Visit [freshstart.alaska.gov](https://freshstart.alaska.gov) to find out more and to explore available programs.

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# Alaska Health Systems Collaboration Unit

## FY2023 Annual Report



### **State of Alaska**

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**December 2023**

