Public Health Leadership in Times of Crisis

Ann Zink, MD
Chief Medical Officer,
State of Alaska

Robert Onders, MD
Medical Director,
Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium
Question for the Viewers

Rate your level of agreement with the following statement: “Leaders in my state have been responsive to current public health crises.”

A. Strongly agree
B. Agree
C. Disagree
D. Strongly disagree
E. Neither agree nor disagree
F. Other (please type in chat)
Lessons from Alaska

Understanding Health Equity in Leadership

Challenges and Strategies for Leading
Lessons from Alaska
Personal Background

Key lesson learned from emergency medical experience:

In the Emergency Department – all public policy comes to fail
Alaska in Context

Alaska is a state with great geographic and human diversity
- **229** of the 566 federally recognized tribes are in Alaska

- **1/5th of population** is Alaska Native

- **Villages** range from 12-3,000 residents

Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section
State demographics reflect an increasingly diverse population.

Percentage by Race 2000–2018
- **Larger than combined area of next 3 largest states:** Texas, California, and Montana

- **Least densely populated state, home to 229 remote villages**

- **“Remoteness” by Access**
  - Small plane: 60%
  - Jet: 11%
  - Highway and jet: 8%
  - Limited road and small plane: 8%
  - Jet, then small plane: 6%
  - Highway: 3%
  - “Extremely Remote”: 3%

Source: Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium
- **90% of communities** off the road system

- Food, gasoline, other necessities are **expensive/in short supply**, residents rely on subsistence hunting

- **At least 75 communities** in Alaska lack any law enforcement presence at all

- **Most villages** lack regular access to police, courts, and related services

Source: Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium
In the Alaskan context, there is a strong connection between health, income, place, and race.
Understanding Health Equity in Leadership
Health of Alaskans

Alaska ranks **better** than other states in the US:

- Low birthweight
- Diabetes
- Children in poverty
- Drug deaths

Alaska ranks **worse** than other states in the US:

- Violent crime
- Smoking
- Excess drinking
- Obesity
- Occupational fatalities
- STIs
- Pertussis

Source: United Health Foundation – America’s Health Ranking (Alaska): www.americashealthrankings.org
Racial Inequities: Smoking

Percentage of Adults Who Smoke, by Race/Ethnicity, Alaska, 2015–2017

* Note: The race categories of African American, Asian, Pacific Islander, and White do not include respondents of Hispanic ethnicity. Percentages reported in this graph are for 2015–2017 combined, and may differ from those reported elsewhere for 2017 only.

Source: Alaska Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, Combined File
Racial Inequities: Diabetes

Percentage of Alaskan adults (18+) with diabetes
Crude rate by race/ethnicity, 2016–2018 (3-year average)

- Alaska Native (any mention)
- Asian (non-Hispanic)
- Black (non-Hispanic)
- Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander (non-Hispanic)
- White (non-Hispanic)
- Multiracial/Other (non-Hisp.)
- Hispanic (alone or multi)

Source: Alaska IBIS, Diabetes Program, Section of Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion
Health Outcomes by “County,” 2019

Health Ranking:
- 1–6
- 7–12
- 13–19
- 20–25
- Not ranked

Prevalence of Medically Underlying Conditions

Risk of COVID complications **due to underlying medical conditions**, by:

Adjacent maps display variations across the U.S. by percentage and number of people affected.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: [www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6929a1.htm?s_cid=mm6929a1_w#T1_down](http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6929a1.htm?s_cid=mm6929a1_w#T1_down)
Historical and Ongoing Systemic Trauma

The colonization of Alaska, recent history and political and economic and social systems play a major role in the health of its indigenous communities.

Cemetery in Kivalina, a village in the Northwest Arctic. Generations of Alaska Native children endured abuse at the hands of religious and educational authorities, along with Alaska Native people experiencing land dispossession, voter disenfranchisement, and threats to their traditional and customary use of traditional food sources.
A historical photograph of Doctor Linus Hiram French meeting orphans of the Spanish Flu epidemic in 1919.

Source: Tim Troll from the Peninsula Clarion
Tuberculosis, 1700’s - present

Alaskan Native home care facility for treatment of tuberculosis

Challenges and Strategies for Leading
Health care is complicated and will always be imperfect, but how we structure our care is the next wave of medical transformation.

Source: Alaska Department of Health and Social Services: dhss.alaska.gov/
The Importance of Telehealth

Telehealth is an especially important source of care delivery in Alaska, particularly rural communities.
The US Coast Guard is an important partner in care delivery for remote communities.
Health Care in Alaska is very expensive

- There is an inverse relationship between personal health care expenditures and life expectancy
- High healthcare costs are often significantly downstream of the cause of a health problem

Source: Alaska Department of Health and Social Services: [dhss.alaska.gov](http://dhss.alaska.gov)
The goal of the project is to provide a vehicle for strengthening the support system for at risk youth and their families to prevent crises and keep families whole and healthy.
Alaska and COVID-19: Vulnerable Communities

Alaska Department of Health and Social Services staff at the Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation (YKHC) – ykhc.org
Epidemic curve by onset date, Alaska

Log-linear model: Short term forecast with 95% confidence band

*Note: Analyses truncated by 7 days (gray bars) due to delay in reporting, resulting in incomplete data

Source: Alaska Department of Health and Social Services - COVID-19 Alert Levels:
dhss.alaska.gov/dph/Epi/id/Pages/COVID-19/alertlevels.aspx
Alaska and COVID-19: Total Cases by Race

Source: State of Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, Division of Public Health
Does distribution of cases reflect population distribution?

Source: State of Alaska, Department of Health and Social Services, Division of Public Health, Section of Health Analytics and Vital Records
Is severity different by race and ethnicity?

Source - State of Alaska, Department of Health and Social Services, Division of Public Health, Section of Health Analytics and Vital Records
## Alaska and COVID-19: Deaths by Race

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Hospitalizations</th>
<th>Deaths</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIAN</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Race</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unknown/blank</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>116</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source - State of Alaska, Department of Health and Social Services, Division of Public Health, Section of Epidemiology
Racial/ethnic minorities and non-native English speakers:

- Are significantly more likely to have a job that didn't allow them to work from home during the "Hunker Down" order.

- Have significantly greater household size than their counterparts (on average at least 5 members per household).

- Along with people with disabilities, significantly less likely to engage in COVID-19 related risk behaviors (not wearing a mask, not physical distancing, etc.).

- Reported significantly higher levels of worry in terms of household finances, losing employment, having self or members of their household being infected by coronavirus, and having enough to eat compared to their counterparts.

Source: Unpublished data from Dr. Gabriel Garcia, UAA College of Health Sciences
Additional Challenges

The challenge of being “the little guy”
The challenge of getting what is needed
The challenges of industry, in particular fisheries and fish processing
Responsive Health Communications

Alaska's health communications campaigns, such as *Mask up, Alaska!,* are inclusive of Alaska's diverse population. Language access is also key in communications.
Responsive Health Communications

Businesses have access to resources like the COVID Conscious toolkit to keep employees and customers safe:
Tribal-State Collaboration

Shared leadership between state government and native and tribal communities is critical for Alaska.

Dr. Zink meets with Mayor Morris Nashoanak of Stebbins.
Tribal-State Collaboration

Shared decision-making, allocation of resources, data-sharing, and communications support Alaska’s public health. However, conflicts can arise.
“Guards work 24 hours a day to keep COVID out of some small Alaska Native villages” — Sean Maguire, KTUU News

“Alaska’s Remote Villages Are Cutting Themselves Off to Avoid Even ‘One Single Case’ of Coronavirus” — TIME Magazine

“Alaska tribes facing food supply restrictions during pandemic seek to hunt out of season” — Anchorage Daily News

“In Alaska town, calls to shut down fishing season amid coronavirus fears” — The Washington Post
In the face of Alaska's ongoing challenges, I strive to:

- Be clear with my role
- Follow data and science
- Practice humility
- Exercise honesty
- Remove the noise
- Seek partnership

Dr. Zink's wood-stove heated office yurt, behind her family home outside of Anchorage.
QUESTIONS?

To ask a question, please click the icon in the Zoom toolbar to open your Q&A Pod.
Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (ANTHC)
Preparing Tribal Health partners and medical professionals for COVID-19
anthc.org/covid19/covid19readiness/

Alaska Department of Health and Social Services
Alaska’s 1115 Behavioral Health Waiver
dhss.alaska.gov/dbh/Pages/1115/default.aspx

Alaska Department of Health and Social Services
COVID Conscious Business Toolkit
dhss.alaska.gov/dph/epi/id/pages/COVID-19/business.aspx

For additional resources, please visit our training page:
www.nwcphp.org/training/public-health-leadership-during-crisis