



# Alaska Native Aging In Place

A Mt. Sanford Tribal Consortium Initiative



## Who does this project serve?

This initiative focuses its efforts on supporting native elders in two tribes in rural Alaska and their elderly non-native neighbors living in the region surrounding the tribes.

## What is the project attempting to do?

The severity of geographic isolation and extremes in climate and terrain impacts daily activities for all residents in the area, and environmental challenges are especially acute for the aging population. Large numbers of tribal members leave their homes due to economic and health related challenges. To begin to address this exodus, our focus has been to provide services and referrals directly to elders based on what **THEY** say are the most important elements to stay in their homes and tribes. Ultimately, this project is to create a partnership based care model that can be modified and duplicated in other extreme locations in order to **empower elders**, allowing them to stay their homes in a manner that is safe, culturally sound, and sustainable.

## What has the project been doing to accomplish this?

- Care Giver and Family Education
- Streamlining referrals through partnership providers
- Providing Assistance for culturally appropriate activities: Subsistence foods, craftwork, visiting, potlaches, memorials,
- Developing outside resources: ie: Starting a medical transportation system via Medicaid reimbursement
- Enhancing the interaction between health clinic staff and project staff
- Developing a more robust local health delivery system internally and with partner providers
- Assisting with enabling youth/ elder interaction and activities to strengthen relationships Providing direct services for those who "slip through the cracks"
- Assisting in basic survival and safety issues for elders: haul water for those without wells, fix handrails at elders homes, split firewood that the elders can't

## Innovation: Friend or Foe

Innovation in some ways has led to the challenges faced by elders we are serving. In the time our oldest living elder was a child, there were no stores or automobiles, nor wells or phones, no social security or law enforcement. There was only survival for your tribe and your family. Work was paramount to living, and that was the only thing on ones mind. Now flash forward to all that we have today. So much has changed that there is a disconnect with what was once most precious to them. Community, family, work, and a sense of place.

So what is innovative about the project? While it may look like training local family members to care for their relatives who are aging is a concept that is old, and not innovative, you are partly right, it is very old. In the tribal context, it is hundreds and hundreds of years old. But it was lost, like the medicine people, like the clan system, and many cultural traditions. Our innovation in the project's activities is to bring back what is the best of tribal life to our elders using modern technologies, and care for them in a way that bridges what is old and nearly lost, to what is new and exceedingly complex.

## A Way Home

An elder who has struggled much of her life with diabetes, COPD and hypertension had a serious stroke leaving her for a year without the use of any speech and mobility. For two years she yearned to leave her Anchorage nursing home and being back with her community and family. Through efforts by this project, three partner agencies and the State, the elder now receives care at home. Many people, including her husband once believed that there was no way to have her return. She is now back, and her joyousness is infectious. Because of many dedicated people from across the state working together out of compassion, this elder is receiving the best care available and has found her way home.

Challenges Faced: Staff vacancies, staff development, communication and coordination

