

**NATIONAL PANEL PRAISES ALASKA TRIBAL HEALTH SYSTEM SUCCESSES
'THANKFULLY IN ALASKA, INCREDIBLE TRIBAL LEADERS CAME TOGETHER
AND SAID, 'ENOUGH'**

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At the National Indian Health Board annual conference this week, health experts said tribal health systems were hard-pressed during the COVID-19 pandemic and are still operating below pre-pandemic capacity. Staffing shortages are a key concern, along with funding gaps, low bandwidth for telemedicine, health disparities, and a lack of infrastructure.

However, there is a path to success, said Alaska tribal health leaders.

“When we provide care as close to home as possible, and in the language and the cultural norms of the people that we serve, we know we have much better health outcomes. We see that time and time and time again.” So said Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium President and CEO Valerie Nurr’araluk Davidson, Yup’ik.

During her keynote address and a following panel discussion, participants heard success stories about the Alaska Tribal Health System, an affiliation of tribes and tribal health organizations with approximately 12,000 employees serving more than 170,000 tribal citizens.

Alaska tribes and tribal health organizations began assuming management of Indian Health Service programs in the 1970s under the Indian Self-Determination and Educational Assistance Act. Then in 1994, 26 of them signed the Alaska Tribal Health Compact, which authorizes them to operate health and health-related programs through a government-to-government agreement with the U.S. Indian Health Service.

This compact was one of the first such multi-party agreements in the nation, said panelist Alberta Unok, Yup’ik. She’s president of the statewide advocacy organization the Alaska Native Health Board.

The Alaska Tribal Health System provides statewide coordination of care, she said. “Collectively, it forms an integrated health network providing healthcare services at the village clinic, regional hubs, and at the Alaska Native Medical Center.” “There are 229 tribes here in Alaska. In our system, managed by Alaska Native people for Alaska Native people, we take a culturally responsive approach to promoting wellness and are pleased to see the theme of the overall conference embodied in cultural recognition, promoting traditions such as Native languages, storytelling, songs and dances, traditional foods, plants. These are some of the best medicines for treating our people in a holistic manner,” Unok said.

Having Alaska Native leadership setting priorities and making funding decisions to provide culturally appropriate care has made a world of difference over having a system run by the Indian Health Service, said Davidson.

As one example, she described visits to the dentist in her childhood. A dentist visited her home village typically every two years, Davidson said. “We would be rounded up class by class and we would be taken to the clinic, a one-room clinic where the dentist had set up operations. We would stand in line as our sibling, our cousin, our classmate was behind the door.