

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION NETWORK

Funding for Safe Drinking Water and Indoor Plumbing for Alaska Native Villages Seriously Threatened

What challenges does infrastructure assistance to Alaska Native villages address?

Rural Alaska is home to over 280 isolated villages scattered across an area more than twice the size of Texas. Their population is predominantly Native. Many of these communities are low-income, with rates of unemployment frequently exceeding 50%. Some are in remote locations only accessible by water and air. The state estimates that one family in three does not have a sanitary way to dispose of sewage or an adequate supply of safe drinking water. For members of these families, buckets or pit privies are the only way to dispose of human waste, and people must haul water for drinking and bathing from community watering points or untreated sources such as creeks or rivers, increasing health risks from exposure to the waste.

- As a result, Alaska Natives are hospitalized for infectious diseases at a rate 28 percent higher than the national average. The rate is even higher for infants.
- Approximately 22 percent of all tribal and Alaska Native Village hospitalizations are for infectious diseases, including lower respiratory tract infections; skin and soft tissue infections; and infections of the kidney, urinary tract and bladder.

What will be lost if the Alaska Native Villages Program is decimated?

- Many Alaskan Native villages and other rural communities would be denied opportunities to install or upgrade drinking water and wastewater infrastructure critically needed to protect people's health and the environment.
- Children and adults in communities that lack sanitary facilities would continue to suffer significant and disproportionate health problems resulting from exposure to raw sewage and drinking water contaminants.

How does the Alaska Native Village program work?

- The Alaska Native Villages and Rural Communities Rural Grant Program provides funds to address serious human health and water quality problems in communities that lack basic drinking water and sanitation infrastructure such as flushing toilets and running water. Alaska Native villages and other vulnerable rural areas are disproportionately affected by the lack such services.
- The state of Alaska sets priorities for receiving infrastructure funding based on risk and directs funds to projects that will have the greatest public health and environmental benefits.
- The program assists communities with the construction of new or improved drinking water or wastewater treatment systems.
- Funds may also be provided for technical and financial training assistance to help communities maintain and protect their water infrastructure.

Successes of the program

A 2008 study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that health disparities associated with the lack of in-home water service could be addressed through sanitation infrastructure.

- Both waterborne disease rates and health care costs have decreased through the reduction of exposure to raw sewage and drinking water contaminants.

- Villages that receive funding from the Alaska Native Villages program for the construction of water sanitation facilities have a lower risk of skin infections and respiratory illnesses and overall improvements in daily well-being.

Until recently, the Kwethluk Community was the largest underserved community in Alaska, with limited access to drinking water and no wastewater infrastructure. A total of 181 homes lacked access to drinking water and wastewater infrastructure. Community members hauled potable water from a central distribution point and disposed of human waste using open buckets that were transferred in collection containers via ATV to a lagoon outside of town. These conditions presented major health risks as spills were common and contamination was spread throughout the community by rain and airborne dust. In 2009, the Alaska Native Villages program and other partners funded the construction of drinking water and wastewater community facilities and plumbing connections to each home. When the project was complete, families throughout the Kwethluk community had flush toilets in their homes and were able to drink water safely from their taps for the first time.

Baseline Budget FY 2016

\$20.000 million, 0.0 FTE (Staff)

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