

Bering Strait Community Needs Assessment

September 2019

Prepared by
McDowell
GROUP

Prepared for



Introduction

This Bering Strait Community Needs Assessment Summary was developed together with the Bering Strait Community Needs Assessment Data Book. These two documents are intended for use together to discuss needs in the region and plan for future programs and services. This summary document provides an overview of regional strengths and challenges that arose through conversations and meetings with residents of the region and a comprehensive analysis of regional and local data. Information analyzed includes but is not limited to data on socio-economic, demographic, education, health, public safety, housing, and infrastructure. Data is provided for the Nome Census Area, which includes all communities in the Kawerak Service Area, as well as for individual communities.

The document also presents a set of opportunities for the region moving forward. Opportunities, and recommendations, are based on information in the data book. No priority has been assigned to the recommendations, though each opportunity and recommendation is included in this summary because it rose to a level of importance in this analysis that calls for attention for future planning.

Regional Strengths

Connection and Community

- **Close-knit communities.** The closely connected, family-like nature of communities in the Kawerak Service Area creates a foundation of safety, support, and community.
- In the region, **“friends are family”** and children are often cared for and watched over by the collective of parents, friends, and family throughout their community. This situation allows for unique freedoms, exploration, and opportunities to excel

Lifestyle

- **Subsistence opportunities.** The landscape and resources available in the region offer an abundance of subsistence opportunities and related cultural activities.
- **Culture and arts.** Other cultural and arts opportunities provide a lifestyle that families in the Kawerak Service Area enjoy. The region is home to world-renowned artists, many based in local cultures. Cultural activities are frequent and culture is present in many aspects of life in the region.
- **Outdoor recreation** activities available to regional residents abound. The region is home to several nationally recognized recreation areas, and local environments offer rivers, beaches, tundra, mountains, and the ocean, with sea ice in the winters, to explore and enjoy. Hiking, fishing, hunting and trapping, bird watching, camping, boating, snowmobiling, and many other activities are available.

Education

- **Robust Head Start/Early Head Start programming.** Head Start/Early Head Start is viewed as having a highly positive impact on children, as it expands socialization skills, teaches cultural values and native language, offers healthy food choices, and prepares students for successful transition into the K-12 system.
- **Small school environments provide unique learning opportunities.** Small classroom sizes and close community connections allow children to excel and provide unique learning opportunities.
- **Strong education partnerships,** including between Kawerak, Inc., UAF NW Campus, and NACTEC, regional school districts, NSHC, and NSEDC pool personnel and provide financial resources to create educational programs and assist with credentialing.

Health Care

- **Diverse, well-organized health care is available in the region.** Individuals residing in the Kawerak Service Area have access to an array of health care services provided through Norton Sound Health Corporation, the Nome Public Health Center, and a few private providers through services in Nome and Unalakleet, community clinics, and visiting health professionals.

Top 10 Community Strengths

As ranked by regional CNA questionnaire respondents, community strengths are noted in the table below.

Top 10 Community Strengths in the Kawerak Service Area

1. Subsistence opportunities
2. Schools
3. Outdoor recreation
4. Elders
5. Strong families
6. Community involvement
7. Natural setting
8. Cultural activities
9. Health care resources
10. Public safety

Regional Challenges and Needs

Basic needs for shelter, sanitation, food security, and income impact all other aspects of life, and therefore are important elements in addressing regional economic, social, educational, and health challenges.

Housing Availability, Quality, and Affordability

The Kawerak Service Area is challenged by a host of housing issues, including shortages, aging housing stock, overcrowding, affordability, and environmental issues, including air quality. These issues create or exacerbate a number of other important social and health concerns (especially when overcrowding occurs) and lead to homelessness for some residents. Housing availability and affordability are also key concerns for employers when trying to recruit or retain employees.

- **Vacancy rates are low.** Homeowner vacancy rates are 0.3% in the region, compared to 1.8% statewide. Rental vacancy rates are 4.2%, compared to 6.5% statewide.
- **The housing stock is aging.** Nearly all housing units in the Kawerak Service Area (89%) were built prior to 2000, with 45% built before 1980.
- **Homes are small.** The average size of a single-family home in the Nome Census Area, at 1,171 sq. ft. is 60% the size of the average home in Alaska, and multi-family units, at 1,043 sq. ft. on average, are 81% of the statewide average.
- **Overcrowding is commonplace.** Thirty percent of households in the region are considered overcrowded, with 14% of those households in overcrowded conditions (more than one person per room) and 16% in severely overcrowded situations (more than 1.5 people per room).¹
 - Aside from Nome, one-quarter or more of households are overcrowded in all communities aside from White Mountain and Unalakleet.
 - Half or more of households live in overcrowded conditions in Savoonga and Shaktoolik (60% each), Brevig Mission (51%), and Stebbins (50%).
- **Housing is expensive.** Affordability is an issue for many regional families.
 - 26% of homeowners with a mortgage pay 30% or more of their household income for housing.
 - In some communities, at least one-half of owners with mortgages pay 30% or more toward housing: Brevig Mission (50%), Shishmaref (55%), and White Mountain (55%).

Limited Water and Sewer Services

- **Incomplete or non-existent systems.** Diomedes, Shishmaref, Stebbins, Teller, and Wales do not have piped water systems. Only Nome and three villages in the region (Unalakleet, Elim and Shaktoolik) operate with complete water and sewer systems.

¹ Alaska Housing Finance Corporation, 2018 Housing Assessment.

- **Water health concerns.** Water systems within six communities present, at a minimum, a potential adverse health impact. Sanitation deficiency level scores indicate 11 communities have inadequate, unsafe, or no water supply disposal system.
- **Waste disposal concerns.** Six communities operate with Safety Data Sheet (SDS) scores for inadequate, unsafe, or no solid waste disposal system. These include Brevig Mission, Koyuk, Savoonga, Shishmaref, St. Michael, and Stebbins.
- **Health impacts.** Lack of water and sewer has been linked with increased regional incidence of respiratory illnesses from poor sanitation.

Poverty and Unemployment

Unemployment, poverty, and a high cost of living in the region all interact to create unstable living conditions for many families throughout the region.

- **Higher unemployment rates** in the region than Alaska statewide, at 11.6% for 2018 in the Nome Census Area, compared to 6.6% for Alaska. This rate has remained relatively steady for the past decade.
- **Poverty is prevalent.** One-quarter of residents in the Nome Census Area, and 30% of children, are below the federal poverty line. This compares to 10% of Alaska residents and 14% of children in Alaska.
- **Child poverty is high in many communities.** In the region, the percent of children below the poverty line is highest in Brevig Mission, at 67%, followed by Wales (61%) and Gambell (54%).
- **High cost of living.**
 - Electricity costs can be more than double the average cost per kWh statewide. Most communities rely on Power Cost Equalization (PCE), from which credits make rates comparable to the rest of the state for the first 500 kWh; after that, higher rates apply.
 - Groceries in Nome is 131% of the Alaska average, and costs in Kawerak Service Area communities outside Nome are even higher.
- **Transportation and shipping are expensive** regionwide.
- **Interest in subsistence activities is reported to be waning** in some communities, especially among younger people.

Limited and Unreliable Transportation

Limited transportation contributes to a high cost of living, including for basic goods and services. Inclement weather can have further impacts on regional transportation and shipping, causing further isolation and scarcity.

- **Isolation.** No roads connect the region to the rest of Alaska, and most communities are isolated from other communities in the region, at least seasonally.

- **Air transportation is expensive and weather dependent.** Daily jet service from Anchorage is available to Nome and relatively reliable. However, air transportation throughout the rest of the region on smaller planes can be expensive and unreliable due to weather.

Communications

Communications can impact most aspects of life in the region, including education, business, and health care.

- **Internet service can be slow and often disrupted**, as can telephone service in some locations.
- **Communications/internet is not reliable** in several locations, including Gambell, Savoonga, and Diomed. Quintillion's new fiber optic connection is expensive and not available in all communities. The connection is fiber to the provider but still cable to the customer.
- **Recent advances in internet speed and broadband** width may continue to remedy this situation as services are delivered to more communities.
- **Family involvement in educational and school activities** is thought to be waning, and cell phone/internet use is a contributing factor.

Education

ACADEMIC PROGRESS

- **Kindergarten preparedness is lower in the region** than statewide averages. One-quarter of Bering Strait School District kindergarten-age students and 18% in Nome Public Schools entered their kindergarten school year meeting at least 11 of 13 Alaska Developmental Profile goals for child development. This compares to 32% of students statewide.
- **School-age assessment scores are lower** than statewide averages. Nome Public Schools and Bering Strait School District assessment scores are below statewide averages for proficiency for both English Language Arts and Math on the Performance Evaluation for Alaska's Schools (PEAKS) and for Science on the Alaska Science Assessment. For 9th grade, Bering Strait School District, 95% or more of students scored below or far below proficient in both English/Language Arts and Mathematics. In Nome Public Schools, 75% or more of 9th graders scored below or far below proficient in both subjects.

CONSISTENCY

- **Turnover is high for teachers** and other education professionals in the region, making learning environments inconsistent for students. Also, such turnover often means teachers are not invested in the communities in which they work.
- **Transient children in schools.** Children who attend school on a regular basis make good progress. However, lots of transient populations in Nome and the other villages make it hard for learning to be

consistent for students. Children move between communities to live with other family members or with their parents who are looking for employment.

EARLY CARE AND LEARNING SERVICES

- **Early care and learning (ECL) services are in need throughout the region.** Currently care is unavailable or too expensive for many families who need ECL services in order to participate in the workforce.
- **Foster care families are limited by limited ECL services,** as they cannot care for children without available ECL services.

TRANSITIONS TO POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION OR THE WORKFORCE

- **Transitions from home communities can be difficult.** Students from the region have traditionally met with culture shock and difficulties with social life and life skills when leaving their home communities for jobs or post-secondary education opportunities.

Public Safety

- **Recruitment and retention of Village Public Safety Officers (VPSOs).** At the time of this report, five villages in the Kawerak Service Area are currently staffed with VPSOs. Many other positions are vacant and have proven difficult to fill. VPOs are present in some communities but not others. Training, qualifications, and recruitment are all issues.
- **Other public safety issues,** such as emergency response planning, and adequate fire protection are also in need of attention in some villages.

Health Status

TEEN PREGNANCY RATES

- **Teen birth rates are significantly higher** in the region than in the rest of Alaska, at 72.2 and 25.0, respectively per 1,000 girls 15 to 19 years of age.

HIGH RATES OF SOME CHRONIC AND COMMUNICABLE DISEASES

- **Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease** prevalence is higher regionally, at 9% of adults, than elsewhere in Alaska, at 5%.
- **Higher rates of communicable disease,** such as tuberculosis (25 incidents per 1,000 versus 9 statewide), chlamydia (2,573 per 100,000 versus 764 statewide), and gonorrhea (845 per 100,000 versus 123 statewide), occur in the region compared to Alaska statewide and the U.S. overall.

SUBSTANCE ABUSE

- **Tobacco product use is prevalent** throughout the region. Almost half of adults currently smoke. Adults are more likely to use Iq'mik, Blackbull, and tobacco leaf or e-cigarette products than adults elsewhere

in Alaska. Over half of area high school students have tried smoking, with about 25% smoking their first whole cigarettes before 13 years of age and the same percentage having smoked at least one day in the previous month. These rates are all significantly higher than statewide.

- **Health impacts due to alcohol.** Over one-third of adults report current alcohol use, which is lower than the rate in the rest of Alaska of 57%. However, area adults report slightly higher rates of binge drinking. Over half of high school students have had one or more alcoholic drinks. Alcohol abuse, or withdrawal is among the top five reasons for hospitalization; alcohol intoxication or withdrawal is among the top five reasons for emergency department visits.
- **High rates of marijuana use for both adults and youth** occur in the region compared to statewide.
- **Pregnant women in the region are much more likely to smoke** than pregnant women elsewhere in Alaska. Considering race, the White population in Alaska has the highest rate of neonatal syndrome births, followed by Alaska Native/American Indian (49% and 35%, respectively).

ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES (ACEs)

- **ACEs incidences high for several indicators.** Two-thirds of adults in the NSHC service area experienced at least one ACEs before 18 years of age, which is similar to the rest of Alaska. However, among several ACE indicators, regional rates are notably higher.

DEATH RATES AND CAUSES OF DEATH

- **Cancer tumors are the most frequent cause of death**, followed by heart disease, unintentional injuries, chronic lower respiratory disease, and intentional self-harm.
- **Infant and young children morality rates** (under 5 years of age) are higher in the region compared to the rest of Alaska.

CHILD HEALTH AND SAFETY

- **Women, Infant, and Child (WIC) program participation is decreasing.**
- **Regional childhood immunization rates are lower** than national averages and some Alaska state indicators.
- **Foster care capacity is extremely limited in the region**, including Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) and non-ICWA homes. While the number of protective service reports to Office of Children's Services (OCS) has decreased, the number of Alaska Native/American Indian children placed out of their home has slightly increased.

Trauma

- **Historical and individual trauma** impacts families and communities in the region. Aside from serious historical trauma that reverberates through generations in the region, sources of trauma vary, but include the prevalence of death and missing persons, alcohol and drug abuse, and crime.

Climate Change

Climate change is impacting daily life, traditional practices, and economies in the Kawerak Service Area.

- **Homes and infrastructure are being damaged** from thawing permafrost and erosion.
- **Access to subsistence resources is changing** as ocean and sea ice environment also change, this is also impacting traditional practices and business, such as resource-based artists.
- **Food security is an issue** as subsistence resources become scarce.

Top 10 Community Challenges

As ranked by regional CNA questionnaire respondents, top community challenges are noted in the table below.

Top 10 Community Challenges in the Kawerak Service Area

1. High cost of living (fuel, housing, transportation, etc.)
2. Inadequate housing
3. Substance abuse
4. Lack of cultural-based activities
5. Lack of treatment for mental illness
6. Limited economic opportunities
7. Inadequate public safety
8. Education system
9. Access to healthy foods
10. Lack of proper sanitation and waste disposal

Opportunities and Recommendations

The following opportunities and recommendations were identified through conversations with community members in the region, analysis of regional trends and data, and consideration of funding circumstances, programs, and services operating in other parts of the state that may impact the Kawerak Service Area. This discussion is meant as a starting point for further strategic planning and identification of priorities and specific action items by members of Kawerak Service Area communities and those involved in planning and implementing programs and services for the region.

Expand and strengthen housing and utilities infrastructure

- **Secure water and sewer systems** for each community. This step is of paramount importance for community health, well-being, and economic prosperity.
- **Build needed housing stock** to not only house community members but also to provide the space to recruit and retain health workers, educators, public safety workers, and other important individuals moving from other areas.

Strengthen the regional education system starting with Pre-K

- **Local teacher training and hiring**, such as the Growing Our Own Teachers program supported by NSEDC and Kawerak, should be supported and encouraged to reduce turnover and provide consistency for students in Pre-K through 12th grade. Such programs provide jobs for people in local communities, allow local residents to remain in their community, and benefit schools by developing teachers who are a good cultural fit for schools and more likely to remain in their position for the long-term.
- **School leadership and regional education leadership stability** impacts teacher recruitment and retention as well. Efforts to develop local educational professionals for school leadership positions, such as principals and superintendents, should also be undertaken.
- **Salaries and benefits** that do not compete with other school districts will make it hard to recruit and retain high quality teachers.
- **Housing for teachers** – both availability and costs are an issue for the education industry in the region.
- **Behavioral health in schools.** Schools, even for young children, are teaching many kids who are in crisis and in high stress situations. Behavioral health professionals are needed for students of all ages, particularly elementary school. Needed support may include anger management, grief counseling, and teaching and modeling coping skills. Parents need support as well.
- **Internet capacity** needs to be adequate to support internet learning platforms for schools.
- **Reliable, consistent, and affordable early care and learning** options need to be developed, particularly for working families. Services are needed, not only for infants through 5 year years of age,

but also for kindergarten through 2nd graders who are not old enough for most out-of-school-time activities.

- **Early Head Start/Head Start** program capacity should be maximized in all communities as funding allows.
 - **Tribal-approved child care** options should be developed and supported to allow individuals, particularly in smaller communities, but also in Nome, to become providers and child care assistance funding to assist families in the community. Once this step is taken, options that allow for different schedules, age groups, and other family needs may be addressed.
 - Consider implementation of a **culture-based early literacy program** modeled on the several currently operating in the state in Southeast and Southcentral Alaska. Such programs can increase kindergarten readiness and ease transition to elementary school. Also family involvement and interest in early education brought about by such programs likely carries over to K-12 years.
- Continue to support programs that **ease transitions** for regional youth at each stage of their education and into early adulthood.

Strengthen culture and language in the community and classroom

- Incorporate more **structured language and culture curriculum** during the school year and intensive sessions in summertime to teach language to children.
- Establish **culture-specific gatherings** focused on language and culture for children, families, and communities in the region.
- **Address trauma** through constructive conversations and willingness to learn and listen.
- **Reduce turnover** in behavioral health services, potentially through expansion of health care programs designed to educate local residents in this field.

Expand consistent child/youth programs and activities in rural communities

- **Out of school programming and infrastructure is needed year-round.**
- **In summer, children need a safe, constructive place to hang out**, particularly in many smaller communities.
- **Indoor recreation facilities are needed in the winter.**

Augment transportation for community health, safety, and the economy

Inter-village improvements are needed for safer travel that connects people, moves goods, and allows for subsistence and recreate. Within communities, dust control is needed, and community roads are also needed in some locations.

- **Water and sewer development must align with transportation projects.** This alignment will require coordination between infrastructure agencies, including transportation and environmental health, and governing bodies, including tribes, cities, and corporations.
- **Resources to operate and maintain infrastructure** once it is in place must also be planned for and provided.
- **Trail staking** efforts need permanent markets for safe and secure snowmobile routes during snow cover and trail hardening for some ATV use in other months when feasible. Shelter cabins along the routes are also needed.
- **Dust control.** For air quality and respiratory health, dust control is essential for communities throughout the region. While paving is the ultimate control, other dust mitigation measures can also be explored.

Support small businesses and entrepreneurs

With an increase in small business activity comes a need for a business landscape supportive of entrepreneurs and individuals new to the business world.

- **Improved technology.** There is a need for improved technology, including hardware, broadband, and solutions to other connectivity issues.
- **Avenues to learn business skills.** Residents need ready access to business skill development such as how to receive money safely, online customer service, accounting, photography, and small business marketing.
- **Build on what exists.** Kawerak conducted a survey of small businesses. The results need to be analyzed to better understand needs specific to businesses in the region.

Secure consistent, qualified public safety personnel and plans in each community

- **Qualified and trusted VPSOs or VPOs need to be present in each community.** If recruitment remains difficult, a new system should be considered to provide basic public safety services.
- **Develop and implement small community emergency response plans** in communities that do not yet have such plans.

Expand mental/behavioral health services for the general community

- **Strengthen inter-agency collaboration** to provide expanded mental and behavioral health services (including substance abuse prevention education and support) to all regional communities.

- **Develop targeted strategies** to provide behavioral health support to community members outside of the court-ordered service population.

Support local and regional climate change planning

- **Strategic plans to adapt to the changing climate are important** for all Kawerak Service Area communities.
- **Include use of traditional knowledge** to successfully reflect the needs of each community.

Foster cooperative relationships within community governing bodies

- Examine each community to evaluate existing **cooperation by community entities** and provide mediation or other support needed when identified.