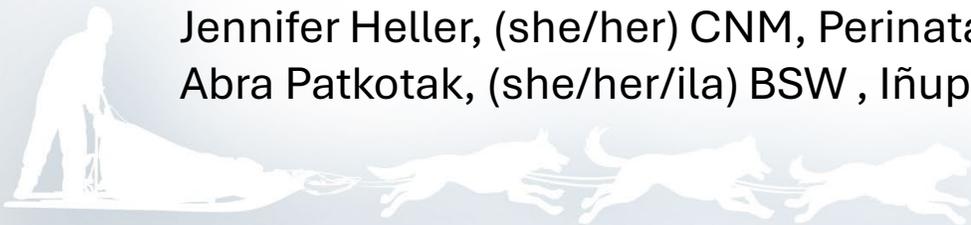


Strengthening Partnerships in Women's, Children's and Family Health:

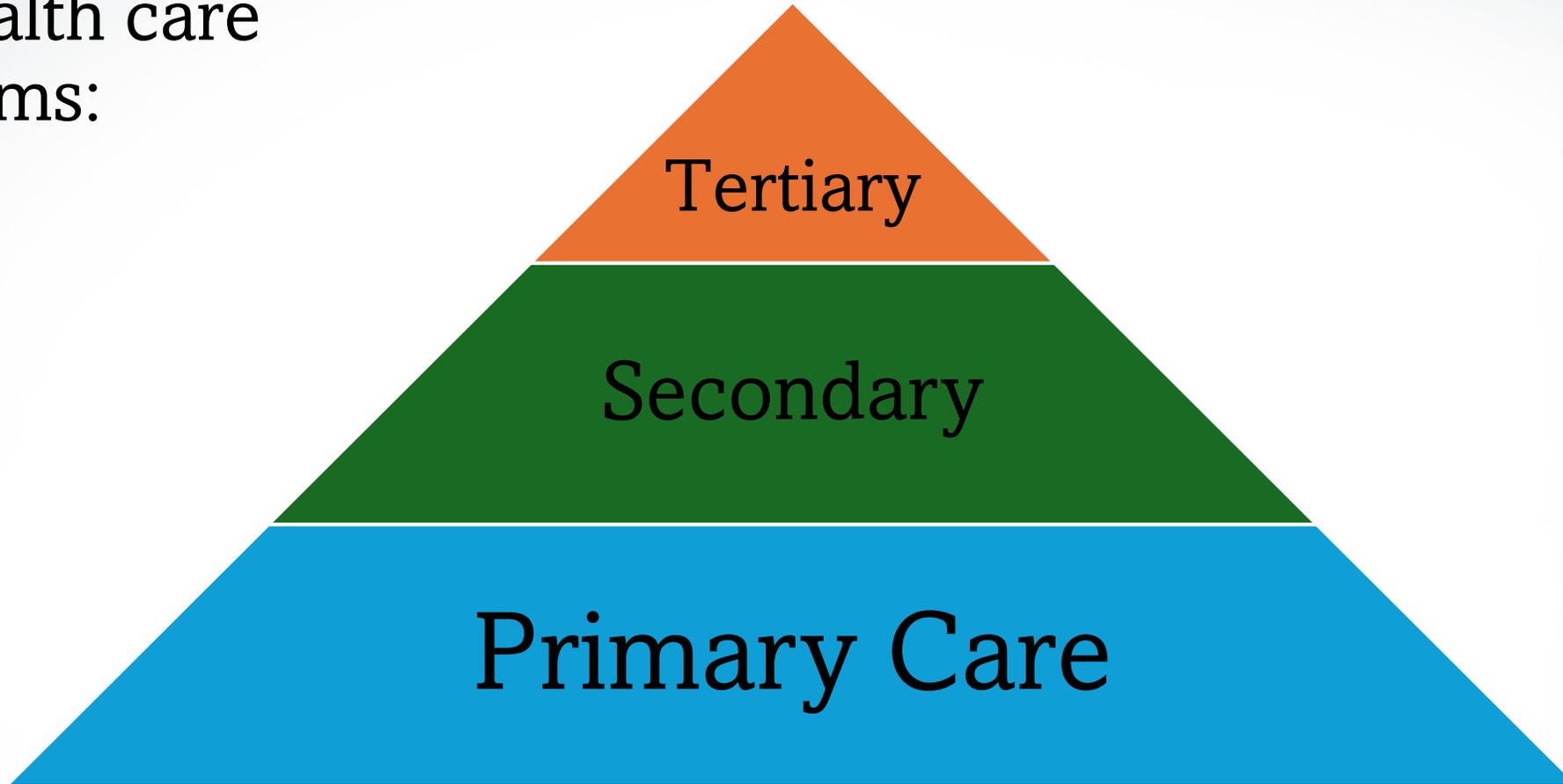
Collaboration with Alaska Native Birthworkers Community (ANBC)

Jennifer Heller, (she/her) CNM, Perinatal Nurse Consultant with WCFH

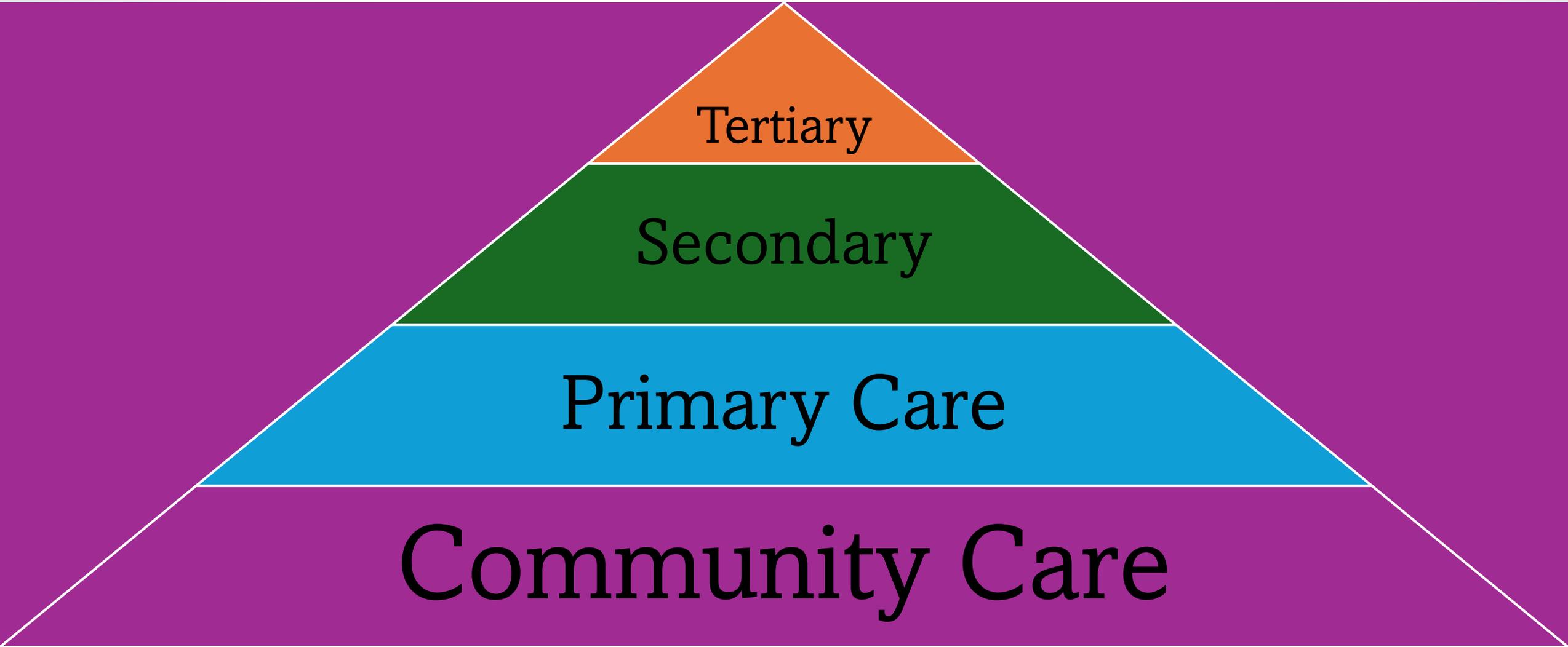
Abra Patkotak, (she/her/ila) BSW , Iñupiaq Birthworker and Student Midwife



A common model
of health care
systems:



Community affects all of health and the health care system



Birth helpers / Doulas / Aunties

- Throughout human history, members of a community have supported new families around the time of a birth.
- **Doula** – Recent title in the US indicating a trained, non-clinical support person during the perinatal period. Funding varies. *Also known as birth helpers, labor support, birth coach, or perinatal community health worker*
- **Community-based birth helpers** - often have shared experiences with their clients and are trained to bridge language and cultural barriers. C-BBHs provide holistic support and connect families with community resources. Their focus is on birthing families who are more likely to experience disparities, and who may be unable to otherwise pay for birth helper services.
- **Indigenous birth helper** – supporting cultural strengths, addressing issues stemming from historical trauma and, in Alaska, the on-going effects of transport for maternity care



Improved outcomes with birth helpers

Facilitated effective relationships with medical professionals

Higher rating of childbirth experience by mothers

Decrease in rates of postpartum mood disorders

Lower rate of c-sections

Lower usage of epidurals

Shorter labors

Fewer low-birth weight babies

Reduced preterm birth rates

Higher breastfeeding initiation rates

Higher rates of infant safety measures, such as back sleeping

Higher 5-minute Apgar score for newborns

Helped mitigate social determinants of health



Maternal Mortality data from MCDR

From 2012-2022: Rates of pregnancy-associated deaths increased by *184% in rural areas*, compared to an increase of 66% in urban areas.

Among 57 deaths reviewed during 2016-2022:

- 88% (n=50) were potentially preventable.
- 44% (n=25) of deaths were associated with barriers to health care access.
- Drug/alcohol use or substance use disorders were documented in 72% (n=38) of deaths.
- 71% (n=40) of decedents had a history of being a victim or possible victim of Interpersonal Violence (IPV).



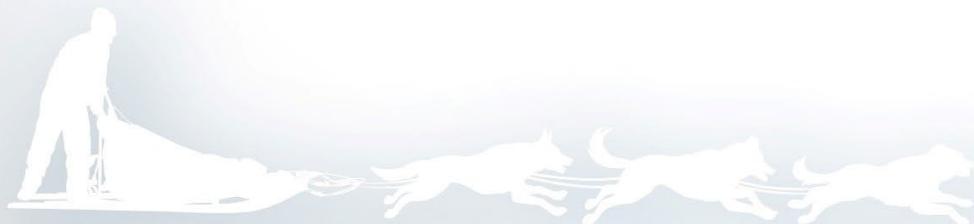
MCDR RECOMMENDATIONS :

- Alaska Native parents should have access to cultural doula services, particularly caregivers with limited social supports when separated from home communities while waiting in Anchorage to give birth or attend medical appointments, and when there are significant health concerns or other stressors.
- States should explore strategies to provide lactation support and postpartum doula services beginning within the first week after delivery.



Alaska PRAMS data

- In 2023 the PRAMS survey included the question: “*Did you use doula support during any of the following time periods?*”
 - During most recent pregnancy*
 - During the birth of my baby*
 - Since my baby was born*



PRAMS results on doula support by PH Region:

	During pregnancy	During Birth	After birth
Anchorage	9.8%	10%	8.7%
Fairbanks/Interior	6.7%	3%	6%
Gulf Coast	8.4%	6.8%	2.3%
Mat-Su	5%	5%	4.9%
Northern (small sample size)	6%	12.4%	6%
Southeast	12%	11.9%	11%
Southwest	6%	6.3%	2.8%

**Alaska
Native
Birthworkers
Community**



Sovereignty from First Breath

AKPQC and MCDR
Joint Summit

March 28, 2025

Abra Patkotak

Who We Are



ANBC Founders L-R: Stacey Lucason, Margaret David with Tala David, Helena Jacobs, Abra Patkotak, Charlene Apok, Stefanie Cromarty.

The Alaska Native Birthworkers Community is a community-based group of full spectrum Indigenous birth helpers and reproductive justice advocates organizing to reclaim Indigenous birth practices and to support Native families from preconception through postpartum with culturally-matched care.

How we came together



Vision

Our communities reconnected to birth through reclamation of ancestral knowledge and exercising sovereignty from birth.

Mission

To serve Alaska Native birthing families so that they feel supported, well cared for, and full of the information they need to make confident choices around reproductive health, birthing, and parenthood. In doing this, we seek to reclaim as well as create new ceremony to heal our ancestors, ourselves, and future generations who may have been harmed through the colonization of our bodies, healthcare, and birthing practices.

Values

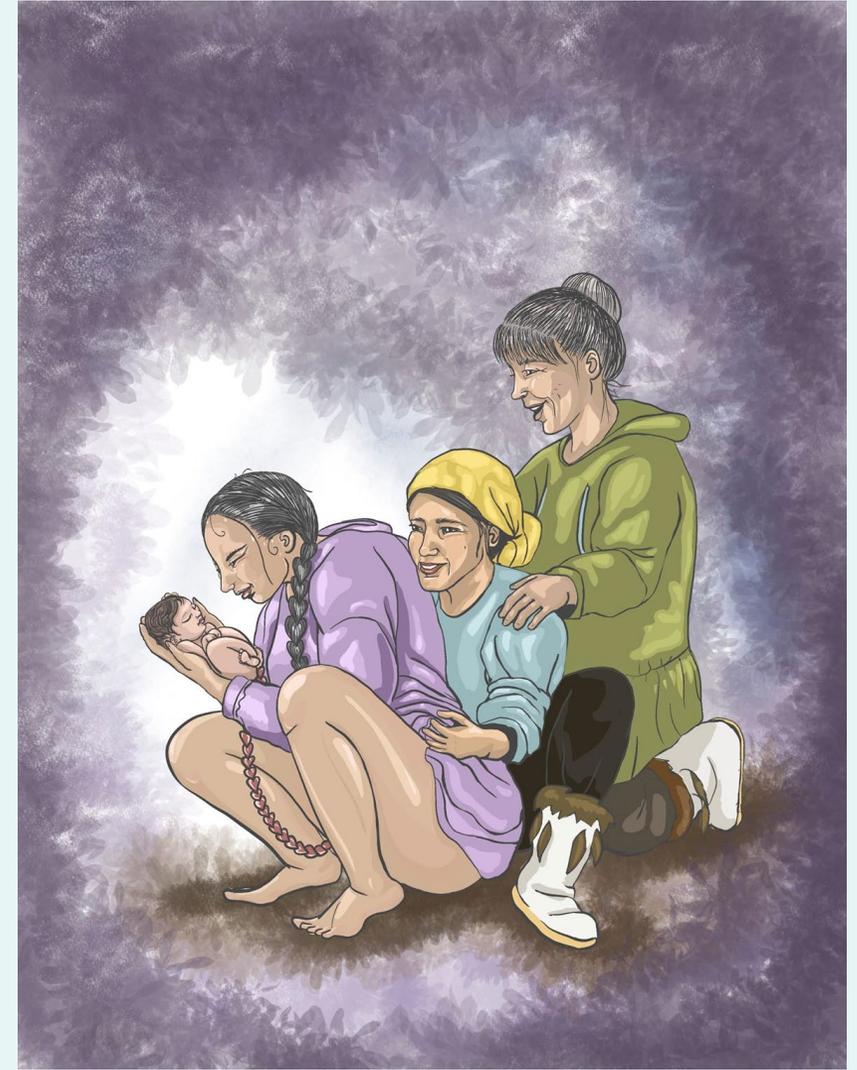
- ❖ Responsibility to Community
- ❖ Culturally Matched Care
- ❖ Connection to Land and Waters
- ❖ Upholding Ceremony and Cultural Teachings



What We Do

Our current services focus on three areas:

- Supporting Native birthing families
- Growing a statewide network of trained Native birthworkers
- Collaborating with partners for systemic change to better support Native and rural birthing families



Community Wellness Events

- Bi-weekly drop-in virtual visiting circles
- Traditional arts workshops
- Traditional knowledge virtual sharing circles
- Childbirth preparation retreats



Growing the Circle of Indigenous Birthworkers in Alaska

- Full Spectrum Indigenous Doula Training 2021
- Indigenous Lactation Counselor Training 2021
- Indigenous Childbirth Educator Training 2022
- Sitnasuaq Birthworkers Support Gathering 2023
- Indigenous Birthhelper Training 2024
- Virtual networking circles, Skill shares



Team Members



Abra Nungasuk Patkotak
Iñupiaq

Abra is a Birthworker, Doula and co-founder of the Alaska Native Birthworkers Community...

[Read More](#)



Adelaine Aktaasiq Ahmasuk
Iñupiaq & Yup'ik

Ady is eager to share her passion around birthwork, grounding her work in a place of healing and community-led direction...

[Read More](#)



Amiah Xootak Johnson
Tlingit / Koyukon Athabaskan / Filipina

Amiah completed the Indigenous Birthworker Training co-hosted by ANBC...

[Read More](#)



Dr. Charlene Agvik Apok
Iñupiaq

Agvik is a cofounder of the ANBC. She earned her B.A. in American Ethnic Studies with a minor...

[Read More](#)



Deezbaa O'Hare
Diné (Navajo), Paiute, Shoshone, Ute

Deezbaa is an Indigenous birthkeeper, student midwife that walks in alignment with birth as ceremony...

[Read More](#)



Helena Benozadleyo Jacobs
Koyukon Athabaskan

Lena is a cofounder of ANBC. She has completed the Full Spectrum Indigenous Doula training...

[Read More](#)



Katrina Leary
Yup'ik and Athabaskan

Birthing strongly called to Katrina after experiencing the struggles of growing...

[Read More](#)



Laura Young
Iñupiaq

Laura is a trained Doula, a Certified Professional Midwife and Licensed Midwife, and has a B.S...

[Read More](#)



Lindsey Earnest
Chippewa

As an Indigenous Doula, Lindsey is able to provide emotional, spiritual, and physical...

[Read More](#)



Margaret Gee'edoydaalo Olin Hoffman David
Koyukon Athabaskan

Margaret is a founding member of the National Indigenous Midwifery Alliance and...

[Read More](#)



Panganga Pungowiwi
St. Lawrence Island Yupik

Panganga has been involved in many grassroots efforts seeking justice for Indigenous Peoples...

[Read More](#)



Shawna Whaley
Suq'piaq

Shawna has been a foster parent, culture bearer, fish and wildlife protector, community educator...

[Read More](#)

Current ANBC Teammates

Abra Patkotak (Iñupiaq), Charlene Apok (Iñupiaq), Helena Jacobs (Koyukon Athabaskan), Amiah Johnson (Tlingit/Koyukon Athabaskan/Filipina), Katrina Leary (Yup'ik & Athabaskan), Lindsey Earnest (Chippewa), Laura Young (Iñupiaq), Margaret David (Koyukon Athabaskan), Adelaine Ahmasuk (Iñupiaq & Yup'ik), Deezbaa O'Hare (Diné (Navajo), Paiute, Shoshone, Ute), Panganga Pungowiwi (St. Lawrence Island Yupik), Shawna Whaley (Suq'piaq), Shaina Aguon (Koyukon Athabaskan)

Indigenous people have supported each other during childbirth since time immemorial...

What is a Birth Helper/ Doula

A birth helper is someone who provides continuous physical, emotional, spiritual, and informational support to a birthing person before, during, and after childbirth, and during the full spectrum (or full circle) of reproductive health experiences. A birth helper can be a valuable member to the birth team, in addition to the partner, family, labor nurse, midwife and/or doctor. As Alaska Native birth helpers, we support and center a family's cultural practices.

What does a Birth Helper do:

- Share information and resources to help prepare for birth, postpartum, parenting
- Provide one-to-one support during labor
 - be a continuous supportive presence
 - help to create a comfortable environment
 - provide reassurance
 - support birthing person's decisions
 - help with comfort techniques
 - share support to entire family
- Help with breastfeeding and postpartum support

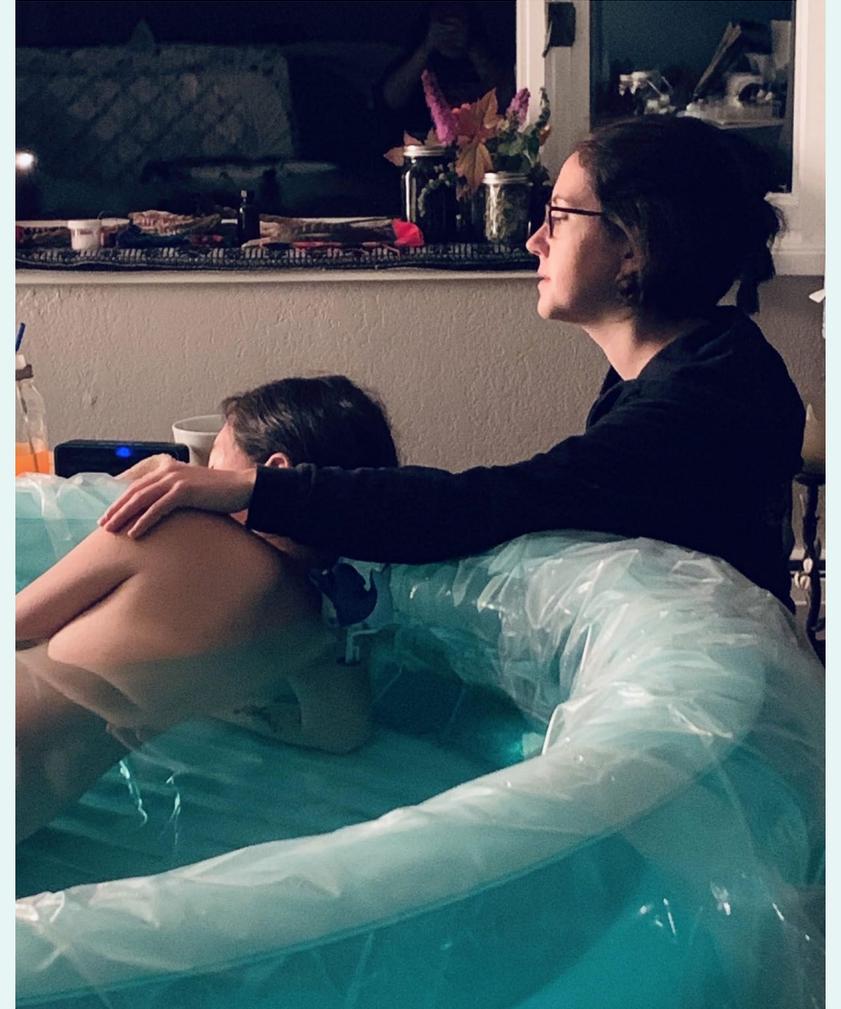


A birth helper does not make any decisions for the birthing person, perform any clinical tasks, or access the birthing person's private health information.

Benefits

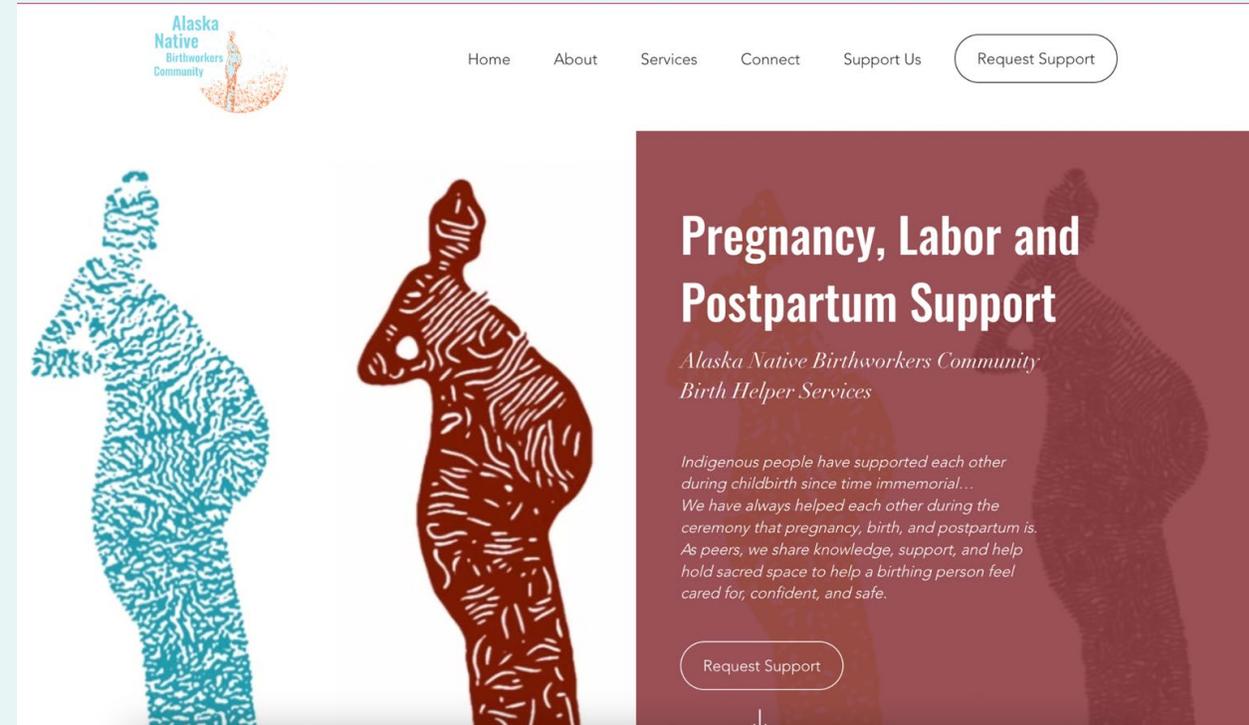
[Research](#) shows that birthing people who use a trained labor companion are:

- More likely to have a spontaneous vaginal birth (less likely to need Pitocin)
- More likely to have a shorter labor than they would have otherwise
- Less likely to have a cesarean birth (or a forceps/vacuum assisted vaginal birth)
- Less likely to use any pain medication
- More likely to have positive feelings about their childbirth experience

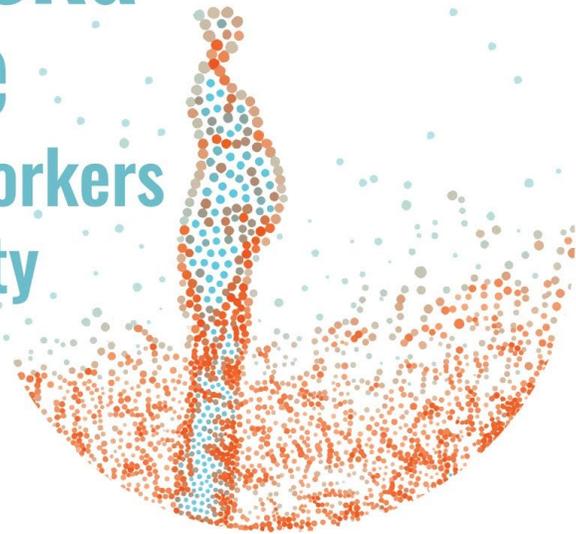


How to Request ANBC Support

1. Matched birth support before the onset of labor through the request form on our website
1. On call labor support through our 24/7 monitored call phone for people in active labor at ANMC who learn about our services upon arrival to the hospital



**Alaska
Native
Birthworkers
Community**



Rural and Indigenous Birthing People in Alaska

Context and Perspective

Birthright

We envision sovereignty for Alaska Native people from our first breaths on Earth, through the reclamation of our power during rites of passage that are rooted in ancestral knowledge and each birthing person being surrounded by their community, in connection to their sacred lands and waters.



Why we do what we do

“We are our ancestors.
When we can heal ourselves,
we heal our ancestors, our
grandmothers, grandfathers,
and our children.

When we heal ourselves
we heal Mother Earth.”

— *Rita Pitka Blumenstein,
Yup'ik Tribal Doctor and
Traditional Midwife*



WATER



ART BY CHRISTI BELCOURT

IS LIFE

Indigenous populations
across the US
disproportionately
experience health
disparities, maternal
mortality, and infant
mortality rates.

Birth work is social justice work



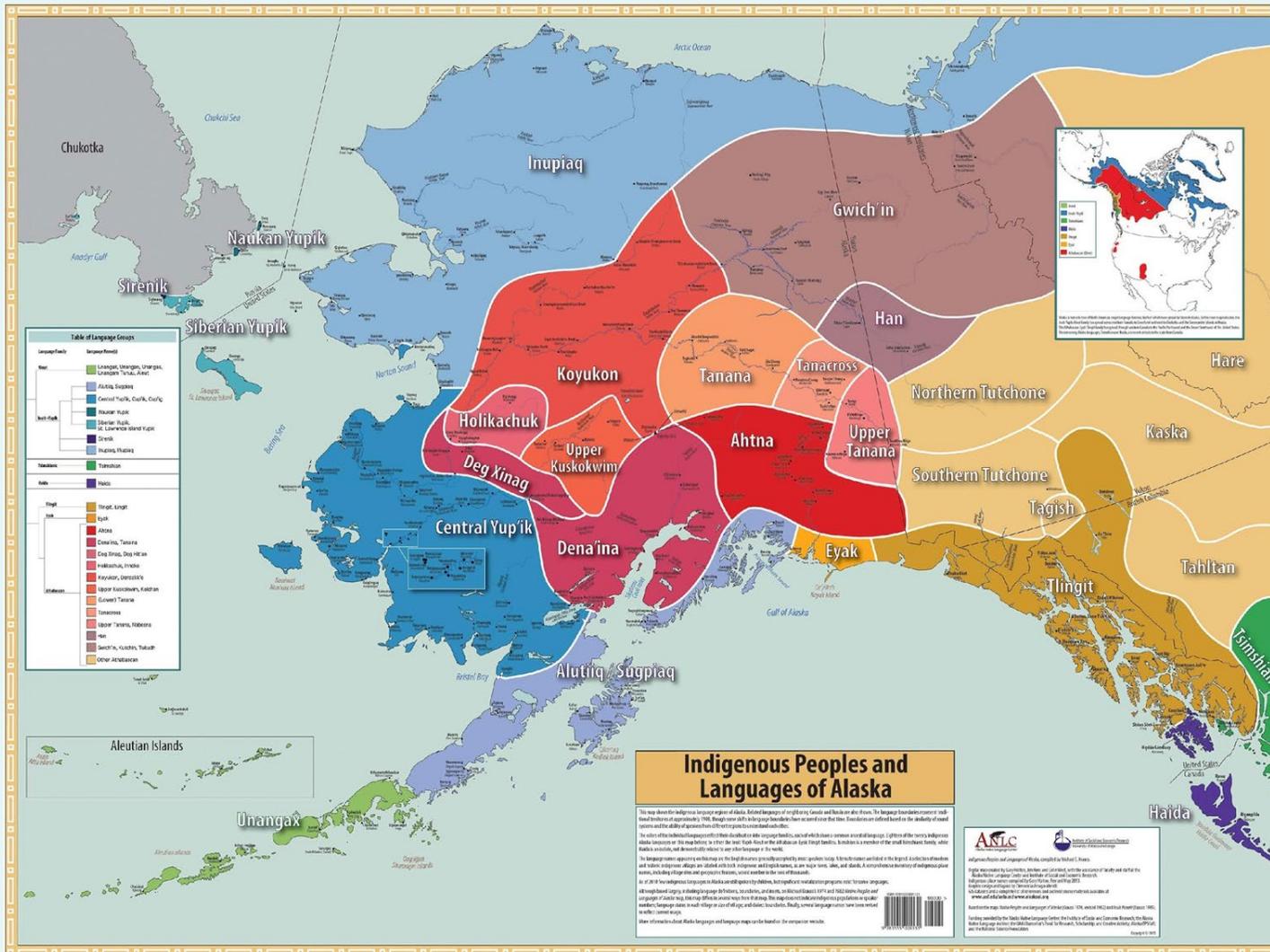
What does 'Indigenous' mean?

- Reciprocal relationship to the lands and waters you come from
- Family lineage/descendancy from a pre-colonial/pre-settler (Indigenous) society
- Grounded in Indigenous culture and language of your territory
- Accepted and claimed by your Indigenous community as their member
- Committed to the wellbeing of your Indigenous Peoples, community, and the lands and waters you originate from

https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/5session_factsheet1.pdf



Brief overview of Indigenous Peoples in Alaska



- 229 Recognized Alaska Native tribes
- 20 Indigenous languages as official state languages
- Approximately 200,000 Alaska Native and American Indian people in Alaska are eligible to receive care through the tribal health system, with 40% living in the Southcentral region (Homer to Talkeetna)

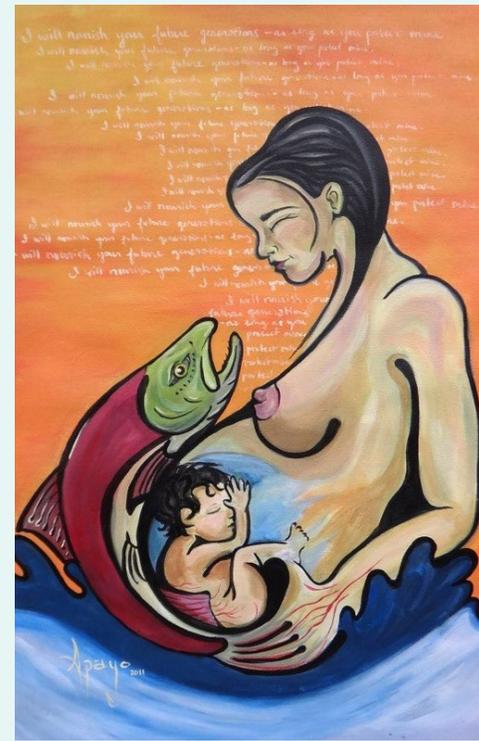
Alaska Native Worldview

Awareness of the interdependence of humanity with the environment, a reverence for and a sense of responsibility for protecting the environment

- Kawagley, 1995

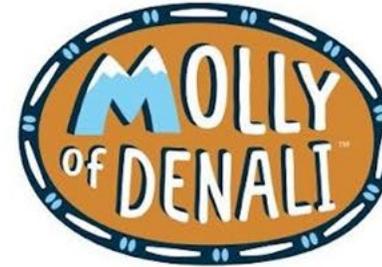
“In order for a person to be whole, they must feed their mind, body, and spirit equally to heal themselves.”

- Rita Blumenstein, Tribal Doctor



Alaska Native Values

All Alaska Native groups have values they hold as core to their cultures. The list below is a select set of values commonly found among most of these diverse groups.

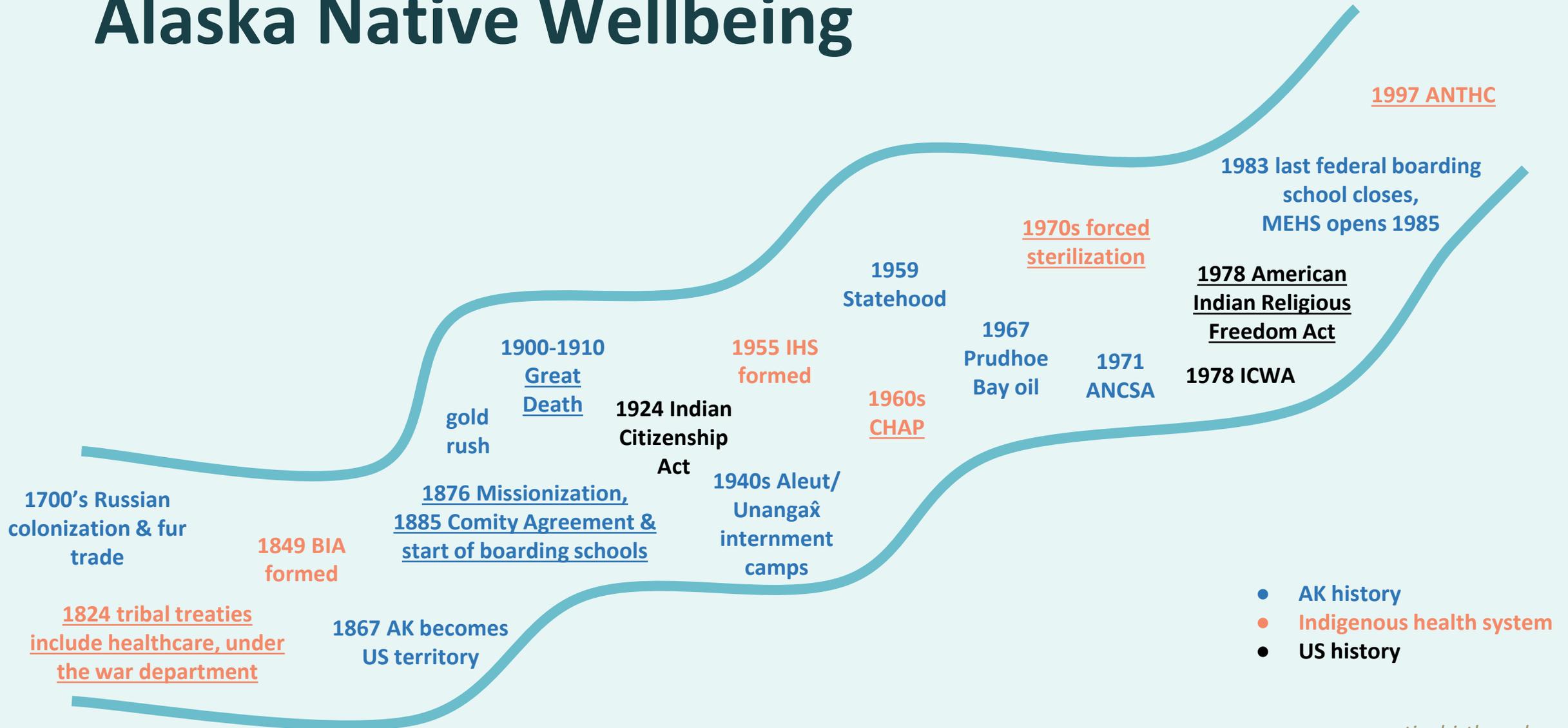


- **Showing Respect to Others** – Each Person Has a Special Gift
- **Sharing What You Have** – Giving Makes You Richer
- **Knowing Who You Are** – You Are an Extension of Your Family
- **Accepting What Life Brings** – You Cannot Control Many Things
- **Having Patience** – Some Things Cannot Be Rushed
- **Living Carefully** – Your Actions Have Consequences
- **Taking Care of Others** – You Cannot Live Without Them
- **Honoring Your Elders** – They Show You the Way in Life
- **Seeing Connections** – All Things Are Related

For a full list of values by cultural group, visit the [Alaska Native Knowledge Network](https://www.uaf.edu/ankn).

Source: Adapted from Alaska Native Values for Curriculum, Alaska Native Knowledge Network, <https://www.uaf.edu/ankn>

Structural Impacts on Alaska Native Wellbeing



Colonialism is the historical and ongoing policy or practices of acquiring political control over another country/land, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it.

Colonization is the process of devaluing and dehumanizing Indigenous people through both formal and informal methods in order to justify exploiting them and their homelands.

Colonialism and Colonization in Alaska



Sign on wall states "DO NOT SPEAK ESKIMO"

Alaska midwives through history



Alaska State Library - Historical Collections

“Midwife at work, Savoonga, 1940’s”



Alaska State Library - Historical Collections

“Midwife training, 1951”

How colonization has shaped where we birth



Della Keats (Puyuq), Inupiaq midwife and traditional healer from near Noatak, 1952

Traditional midwives were re-trained into non-Native medical healthcare systems

Evacuation policies → all births were/are removed from villages

Many rural Alaskans cannot receive perinatal healthcare or birth with any medical support in their communities.

How colonialism has shaped maternity care

Our traditional roles and knowledge were inferiorized when new models of healthcare were introduced, and traditional roles and knowledge are not passed on.

Pregnancy, birth, and postpartum care is routinely referred out of rural communities, away from support systems, traditions, and cultural practices.

When rural and Alaska Native women are removed from their homes for extended periods of time, they cannot fill essential roles, which are inherent to the stability and prosperity of their communities.

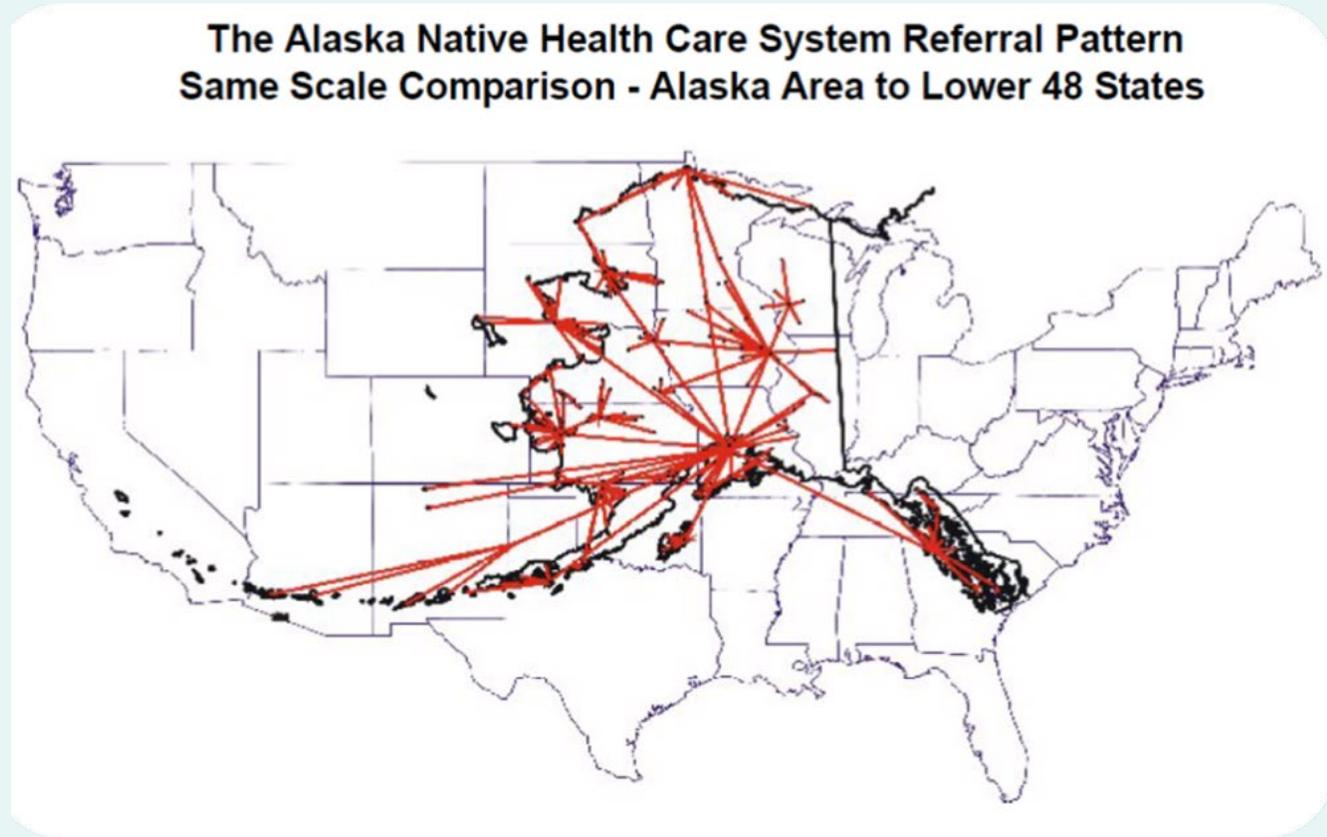
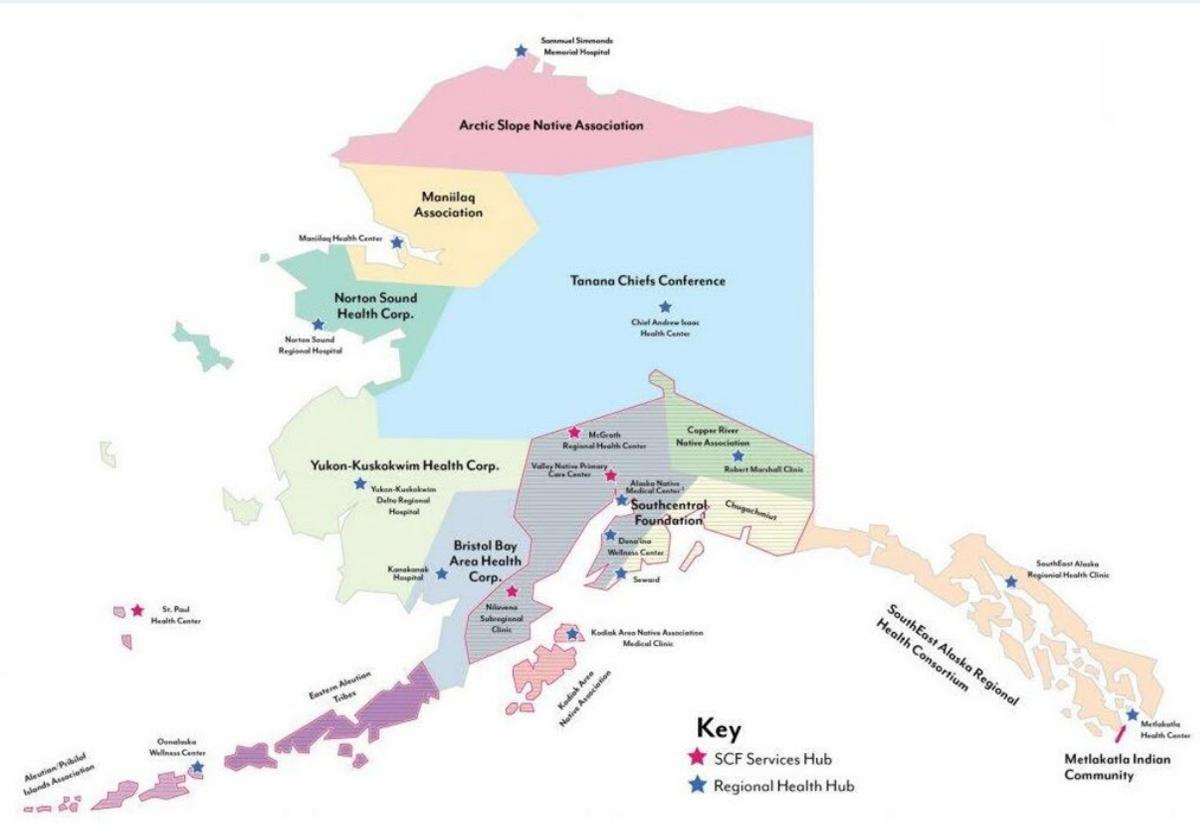
(see UN Dept of Economic and Social Affairs for more)



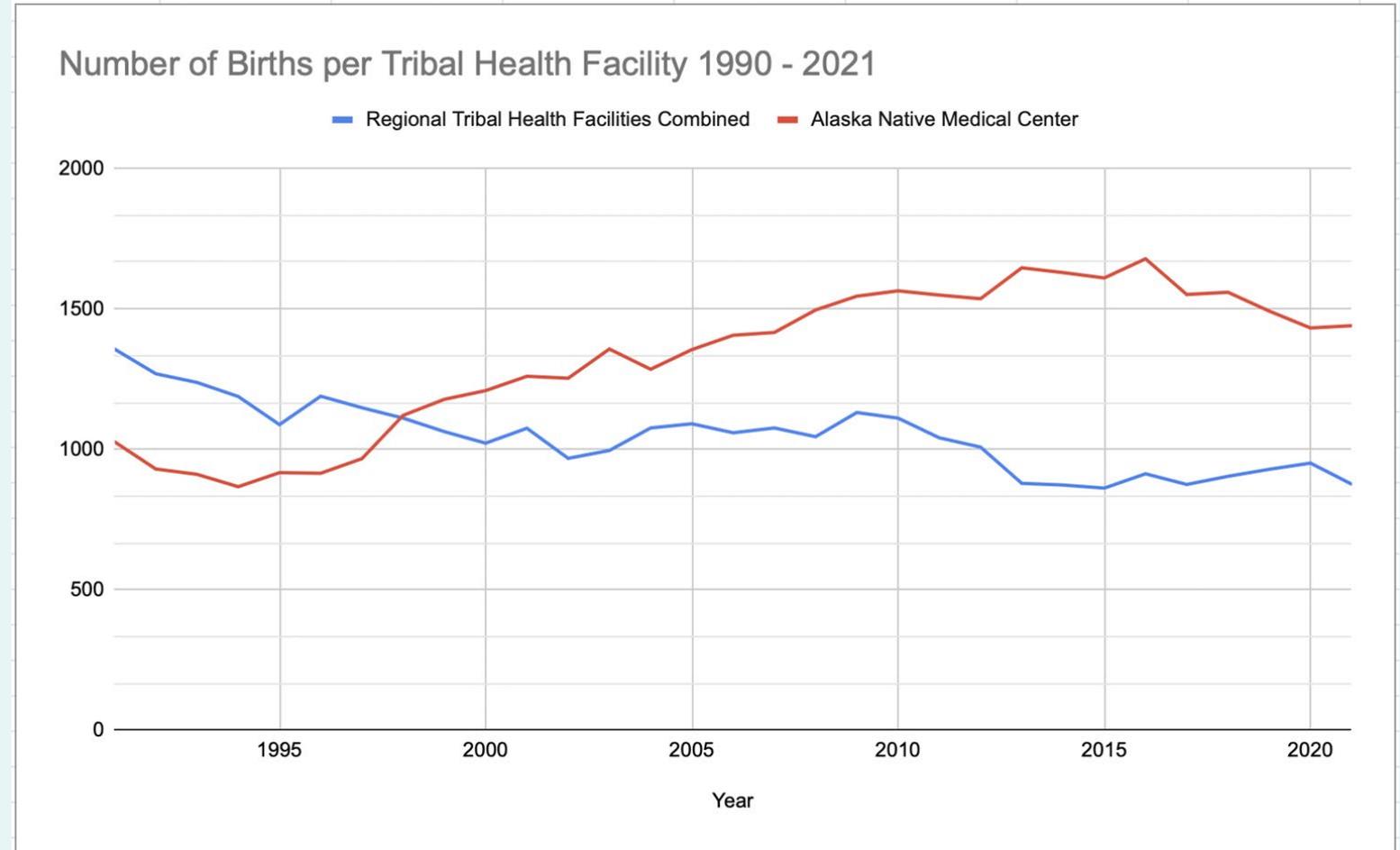
Most rural Alaska Native people birth far from home

- Per Alaska vital statistics, there are about 2000 Alaska Native babies born each year.
- Healthy rural pregnant patients leave home weeks ahead of their estimated due date to await their birth at their regional hub, often alone.
- About half of the births at ANMC are to people who live outside the Anchorage service area (further than 90 miles away).
- Medicaid insurance does not cover travel for a support person except when the patient is a minor.

Where Alaska Native people birth



Where Alaska Native people birth



Source: Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics, July 2022

Quick overview of birthing as a rural person



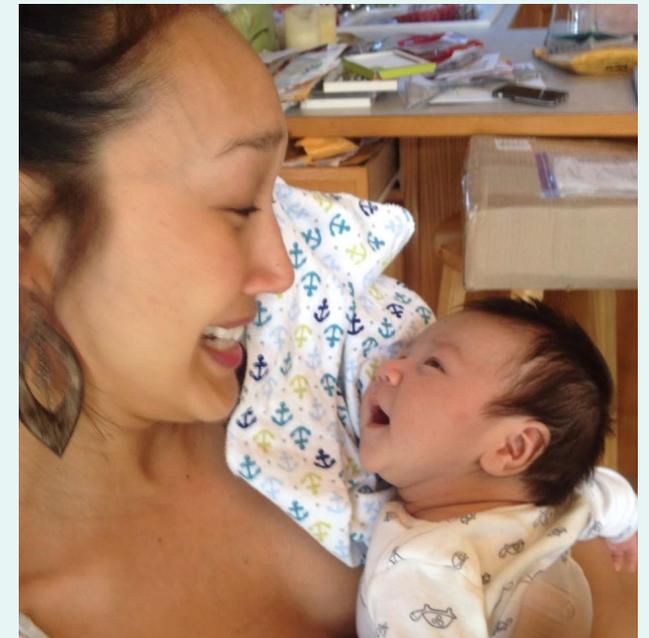


Birth for Alaska Native people is almost always in a hospital setting, usually away from their own community, traditions, and practices

Evacuation is mandatory for rural pregnant people

What can we do to support Alaska Native birthing families?

- Become familiar with cultures and histories
- Become familiar with structural impacts
- Trauma informed/healing centered care
- Traditions as best practices
- Community-based solutions
- Cultural safety



Cultural Safety

Free online introductory course through Frontier Nursing University
3 CEUs, taught by Objibwe midwife Doreen Day and CNM Dr. Erin Tenney



Extends beyond cultural awareness, sensitivity, and skills-based competencies and is predicated on understanding the power differentials inherent in health care service delivery to redress these inequities...

- **It is consumers or patients who decide whether they feel safe with the care that has been given**
- Places an emphasis on the healthcare worker understanding their own culture and identity, and how this manifests in their practice.
- Aims to directly **address the effects of colonialism** within the dominant health system by focusing on the level of cultural safety felt by an individual seeking health care. The **responsibility** to recognize and protect a person's cultural identity (and hence maintain their cultural safety) **lies with the health service**.
- Emphasis is placed on assisting the healthcare worker to understand processes of identity and culture, and how power imbalances or relationships can be culturally unsafe (and thus, detrimental to a person's health and wellbeing)
- It is underpinned by a **social justice framework** and requires individuals to undertake a process of **constant self-reflection**.
- Cultural safety is, therefore, a holistic and shared approach, where all individuals feel safe, can undertake learning together with dignity, and demonstrate deep listening

<https://ceu.catalog.instructure.com/courses/introduction2cultural-safety>.

Questions to consider

Who decides our birth options?

How does the way we birth impact maternal, child, family, and community health?

What do these choices mean for growing families?



Rematriation



Connect with us

*Website: www.nativebirthworkers.org
learn more and read testimonials
from families we've supported*

*Email: abra@nativebirthworkers.org OR
nativebirthworker@gmail.com*

*Facebook: Alaska Native Birthworkers
Community*

Instagram: @nativebirthworkers

The logo features a large, teal-colored circular brushstroke on the right side of the page. Inside this circle, the text "Alaska Native Birthworkers Community" is written in a teal, sans-serif font. To the right of the text is a stylized graphic of a person's profile, composed of numerous small dots in shades of teal, orange, and light blue. The overall design is clean and modern, with a focus on community and connection.

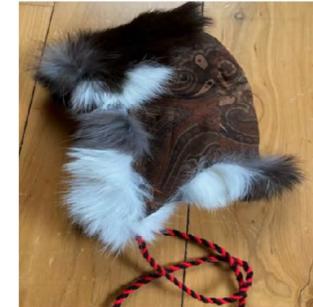
**Alaska
Native
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Maternal Mortality and Violence Prevention Grant:

Reduce maternal deaths from violence by supporting community-based birth helper/doula services through workforce development



Craft Events: In-Person
Bethel/Mamterilleq, April 2023 & 2024



Year 4: Due North Support Services Doula Training

- Full-spectrum, Alaskan focused, trauma-informed birth helper trainings
- Community-based with priority on rural communities
- Mentoring – new birth helpers are supported to care for up to 3 clients after completing training
- Develop sustainability plan – partnering with community for trainings and to provide a framework for continued employment



AKPQC

- SUD Supplementary funds:
 - Recovery Doula: Exploring pathways to integrate dual roles of Peer Support Specialist and Birth Helper to better serve pregnant women experiencing SUD
- Patient Advisory Council
 - Recruiting for individuals with lived experience to participate in AKPQC Steering committee



Community lactation counselor expansion

- Partnering with Kodiak Kindness to expand their model and support development of CLCs in the Northwest Arctic (Kotzebue region).



News

Two Iñupiaq women work to become village-based lactation counselors to better support mothers in Northwest Alaska

By Alena Naiden
Published: February 22, 2024



Noorvik resident Jessica Snyder holds her baby in October, 2023. (Photo by Laura Norton-Cruz)

