

SOUTHEAST REGION

REGION OVERVIEW

Southeast Alaska, also known as the Alaska Panhandle, is a narrow strip of land between the Pacific Ocean and British Columbia and includes over 1,000 islands. It's known for its glaciers, fjords, and temperate rainforest. Southeast Alaska has a land area of 35,138 square miles and a population of approximately 71,616 residents (2020 census). The largest cities in the region are Juneau, Sitka, and Ketchikan. The population in the region is decreasing or stagnant, especially in rural communities, due to limited economic opportunities, outmigration, and aging populations.

CULTURAL CONTEXT

Southeast Alaska is home to a mix of Alaska Native communities, fishing and tourism industries, and small, tightly-knit rural towns. The region is the traditional homeland of the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian peoples, the original inhabitants whose cultures are deeply rooted in oral histories, traditional art, and ceremonial practices. Subsistence practices, including fishing, hunting, and gathering, continue to be vital for both sustenance and cultural identity.

MATERNAL HEALTH DATA SUMMARY

Southeast Alaska has lower crude and teen birth rates than Alaska overall, but higher rates of both early and adequate or better prenatal care and also cesarean births. The area has a higher rate of out-of-state births than the state overall,

potentially due to the lack of birthing facilities in the region combined with proximity to the lower 48 states which can make travel out of state more feasible than travel to Anchorage.

	Southeast	Statewide
General fertility rate	49.6	65.0
Teen birth rate	7.7	16.3
Preterm births	9.6%	10.0%
Low birth weight infants	6.2%	6.7%
Prenatal care in first trimester	82.7%	73.3%
Adequate or better prenatal care	76.5%	66.6%
Cesarean births among low-risk pregnancies	26.8%	18.5%
Cesarean births	29.9%	23.1%
Cigarette smoking during pregnancy	8.8%	9.3%
Infant mortality rate (2014-2023)	6.0	6.4
Crude Birth Rate	9.2	13.2
Average annual births	664	8,758
Medicaid Births (average annual)	361	5,128
% of births to Medicaid	54%	59%
Out of state births to resident Alaskans	240	578
% of resident births	7.2%	1.2%

*All data
2019-2023 unless
otherwise noted.*

SYSTEM OF CARE

There are no roads connecting communities in Southeast Alaska. This means travel by ferries, float planes, fixed-wing aircraft, or commercial flights is required for labor and delivery services for all communities outside of the three regional hubs of Juneau, Ketchikan, and Sitka. Pregnant people in rural communities also often need to travel to a regional hub for an ultrasound early in pregnancy and an anatomy scan around 20 weeks, and they are encouraged to relocate 2-4 weeks before their due dates and earlier for high-risk conditions. There is no NICU or pediatric specialty care in the region so any high-risk pregnancies or babies must travel outside the region.

SouthEast Alaska Regional Health Consortium (SEARHC) offers patient housing in Sitka for tribal beneficiaries delivering at Mount Edgecumbe Medical Center (MEMC) and Bartlett House in Juneau offers some patient housing. While Medicaid recipients can get approval for housing at hotels, those with private insurance often face out-of-pocket expenses.

Births in Southeast Region Hospitals/Birth Centers

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	5 year total	5 year average	% of statewide births	% change over 5 years
PeaceHealth Ketchikan Medical Center	151	158	160	139	138	746	149		-8.61%
Mount Edgecumbe Medical Center (MEMC)	79	87	80	79	82	407	81		3.80%
Bartlett Regional Hospital	304	294	292	274	297	1,461	292		-2.30%
Juneau Family Birth Center	31	17	26	27	26	127	25		-16.13%
Total Births in Southeast Hospitals*	565	556	558	519	543	2,741	548	6%	-3.89%
Total Births to Region Residents	686	665	683	630	659	3,323	665	7%	
# Births leaving region	121	109	125	111	116	582	116		
% of births leaving region							18%		

* does not include home births

STRENGTHS

SOUTHEAST ALASKA HAS A VARIETY OF OPTIONS for prenatal care, including OB/GYN, Family medicine providers, a birth center, and home birth with direct-entry midwives. Rural clinics and hospitals that do not offer deliveries work closely with hospitals in Juneau, Sitka, and Ketchikan to ensure safe transfer of care for high-risk pregnancies.

SOUTHEAST ALASKA REGIONAL HEALTH CONSORTIUM (SEARHC) offers maternity care that incorporates Alaska Native cultural traditions and is actively working to improve village maternity care through OB quality committees

and grant initiatives. RN case managers track patients and hold weekly OB meetings, while quarterly field clinics allow family doctors to see high-risk patients directly in villages.

BARTLETT REGIONAL HOSPITAL enhances maternal care by conducting monthly drills on OB emergencies and actively participating in the Alaska Perinatal Quality Collaborative (AKPQC). Coordination of care continues to improve through regional collaboration and perinatal wraparound programs such as Parents as Teachers, providing additional support for families.

STRENGTHS

Bartlett
Innovations

Bartlett Hello B.A.B.Y. (Building Alaskan Babies with You) is a pilot program, funded by the State of Alaska, that aims to coordinate and connect families with resources. Examples include pregnancy and parenting classes, childcare connections, navigating appointments, assist with baby supplies and diapers, providing transportation solutions, housing and employment assistance and finding counselors that specialize in pre/postnatal care.

Bartlett is in its first year of piloting a 5-year project called TELENEO Trial through the University of Washington that has neonatologists available remotely for newborns needing additional care.

STRENGTHS

PEACEHEALTH KETCHIKAN MEDICAL CENTER has implemented a 3-nurse-per-shift model, ensuring consistent coverage for emergencies regardless of patient census. This proactive staffing approach enhances patient safety and preparedness by maintaining a reliable level of care at all times. The hospital maintains a simulation library that provides hands-on training for maternal and neonatal emergencies,

including the use of mannequins. This commitment to continuous learning helps staff remain prepared for high-risk situations.

TELEHEALTH HAS IMPROVED ACCESS to OB/GYN and maternal-fetal medicine specialists and some clinics now use telehealth technology for fetal monitoring, consultations, and maternal health assessments, reducing the need for travel.

CHALLENGES

LOW BIRTH VOLUME across a large region limits provider options. Only three hospitals offer labor and delivery, all with low volume and limited specialty care; two others have discontinued services. High-risk pregnancies often require travel to Anchorage or Seattle for advanced care.

FEW OPTIONS FOR TEMPORARY HOUSING and financial costs for extended stays create added stress for families. There is a lack of Medicaid approved hotels throughout the region, especially during the summer.

THE LOW NUMBER OF BIRTHS creates a fragile environment where changes in one provider practice can impact the sustainability of other providers. For example, the OB/GYN practice impacts family medicine physicians' delivery volumes.

BEHAVIORAL HEALTH CLINICIAN SHORTAGES, delays in appointments, and the absence of specialized programs for perinatal substance use disorders limit access to necessary care. There is a need for behavioral health treatment that allows babies to be present.

UNRELIABLE FERRY SERVICE from rural communities results in expensive air travel, making it even harder for patients to reach the care they need. Delays in Medicaid approval and travel authorizations can cause travel delays.

LACK OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING in the region as a whole impacts maternal health.

GAPS IN WELL-CHILD DATA COLLECTION and maternal screening contribute to missed opportunities for early intervention.

COLLABORATION and coordinating care between different facilities and providers is challenging but necessary to support the retention of providers.

MATERNITY CARE PROVIDERS

Bartlett Regional Hospital (BRH), Juneau: BRH, owned and operated by the City and Borough of Juneau, is the largest hospital in the region and provides labor and delivery services to Juneau and outlying communities. The hospital has 73 beds including a mother baby unit. Bartlett Beginnings' "rooming-in units" provide private suites where labor, delivery, and recovery all take place in one continuous setting. BRH has 24/7 on-call coverage for anesthesia and cesarean delivery along with full-time pediatric coverage. BRH will deliver babies at 36 weeks gestation. Certified nurse-midwives (CNMs) can offer care for low-risk deliveries, but most births are attended by physicians. BRH offers lactation services and behavioral health services.

In 2022, Bartlett Beginnings was recognized by The Joint Commission for excellence in breastfeeding care, achieving a 99% exclusive breast milk feeding rate throughout newborn hospitalization.

Bartlett offers Hello B.A.B.Y. (Building Alaskan Babies with You), an optional program for parents and their new babies. The program's goal is to offer information, connections, and services to new parents. The Hello B.A.B.Y. coordinator can answer questions and make connections to community programs. This program also helps facilitate timely behavioral health care for those needing it.

SouthEast Alaska Regional Health Consortium (SEARHC): SEARHC is a tribal health organization that provides services throughout the region to both Alaska Natives and non-Natives. SEARHC operates hospitals in Sitka and Wrangell and regional medical clinics in Juneau,

RECOMMENDATIONS / OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

EXPAND BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SERVICES and address staffing shortages and long wait times to access care.

INCREASE HOUSING OPPORTUNITIES, including family-friendly options, for pregnant people who must travel for birth.

OFFER MORE EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS on parenting, lactation, and child development in rural areas along with support groups for parents.

STRENGTHEN INTEGRATION between healthcare facilities and local Tribes to enhance culturally appropriate care and improve overall maternal health outcomes.

EXPAND PERINATAL WRAPAROUND PROGRAMS such as Bartlett Hello B.A.B.Y. to help meet family basic needs such as housing, food, and transportation.

EXPANDED TELEHEALTH ACCESS could enhance care for rural residents.

SUPPORT THE GROWING INTEREST IN DOULA services including advocacy for Medicaid and insurance coverage so low-income people have access to doula services.

SEARHC Collaborative Care Program

SEARHC has been commended for expanding behavioral health services despite national downsizing trends. Through its Collaborative Care Program with the University of Washington, SEARHC integrates mental health and substance use services into primary care settings. This model involves a primary care team working with mental health professionals, including behavioral health care managers and consulting psychiatrists. A 2025 quality goal is to enhance depression screenings, particularly for postpartum depression.

“Alaska does a really good job at reimbursing by Medicaid at a sustainable rate for midwifery care, while we’d like to be paid more, we do better than the national rate.”

— Madi Grimes CMP Juneau Family Birth Center

MATERNITY CARE PROVIDERS

Haines, and Klawock along with 27 clinics in smaller communities. SEARHC provides prenatal care at all clinics and arranges travel to larger clinics for services not available locally such as ultrasound, amniocentesis, etc.

Mt. Edgecumbe Medical Center (MEMC), Sitka:

MEMC is a 25-bed critical access hospital operated by SEARHC serving as the primary referral hospital for Alaska Natives from rural Southeast communities. MEMC provides labor and delivery services with 24/7 on-call coverage for anesthesia and cesarean delivery, as well as an OB/GYN, who may be consulted for high-risk patients or operative deliveries when needed. MEMC is able to handle births at 36 weeks gestation and does not have specialized nursery or NICU services. MEMC is also recognized by the World Health Organization as a Baby-Friendly Hospital.

PeaceHealth Ketchikan Medical Center (PHKMC), Ketchikan:

PHKMC is a nonprofit 25-bed critical access hospital operated by the PeaceHealth system. The New Beginnings Birthing Center provides labor, delivery, recovery and postpartum care all in the same room. The hospital has 24/7 on-call coverage for anesthesia and cesarean delivery. A team of OB/GYNs and CNMs work together to provide care. PHKMC is able to handle births at 36 weeks gestation and does not have specialized nursery or NICU services.

SEARHC Wrangell Medical Center, Wrangell:

WMC is an 8-bed critical access hospital operated by SEARHC. The medical center provides prenatal and postpartum care but does

not provide labor and delivery services. Pregnant people must travel out of town 2-4 weeks prior to their due date.

Petersburg Medical Center (PMC), Petersburg:

PMC is a 12-bed critical access hospital owned by the City and Borough of Petersburg. The primary care clinic includes family medicine physicians and advanced practice providers who provide Women's health and obstetrical care but do not provide labor and delivery services. The clinic provides behavioral health services and medication-assisted treatment (MAT).

Pregnant people must leave town up to four weeks prior to the due date and choose where to go for delivery based on family connections, insurance, and tribal status. PMC staff receive training on emergency OB care to meet the needs of emergency unplanned births that occasionally happen in the community.

Juneau Family Birth Center (JFBC), Juneau:

JFBC is a nonprofit health center offering midwifery care including prenatal care, birth center, or home birth deliveries using certified direct-entry midwives. The majority of patients, roughly 70%, are from Juneau, and telehealth is available for those residing outside of Juneau.

Baby Bean Doula Services, Juneau:

Baby Bean Doula will attend hospital and home births and offer prenatal, labor, and postpartum support; prenatal and postpartum visits are available via telehealth. Scholarships or grants are sometimes available to cover the doula fee. Insurance and Medicaid do not cover the service.

PERINATAL CARE PROVIDERS

Juneau, Sitka, and Ketchikan have private practice clinics providing maternity care and deliveries at local hospitals.

Valley Medical Care in Juneau is a family medicine clinic staffed by family medicine physicians and advanced practice providers. They provide comprehensive prenatal and OB care including cesarean deliveries at Bartlett Regional Hospital. They have collaborative relationships with Maternal-Fetal Medicine physicians in Seattle and Anchorage to support high risk pregnancies.

Juneau OB/GYN Clinic provides comprehensive women's healthcare by OB/GYNs and a CNM. Formerly a private practice, Juneau OB/GYN has recently joined SEARHC but continues to operate separately.

BEHAVIORAL HEALTH PROVIDERS

Behavioral health services include private and tribal providers, such as counselors, advanced practice nurses, psychologists, and psychiatrists. There are no behavioral health providers specifically specializing in care during pregnancy or postpartum.