

# A Resilience-Based Approach to Improving Community Health

Brian Saylor  
Kathy Graves  
Patricia Cochran

**M**ost health planning emphasizes the nature and extent of a population's health problems and deficiencies. However, as a result of our work with indigenous populations, we have found that a resiliency-based, or asset-based, approach to establishing health service priorities offers an effective planning alternative for improving a community's health.

A deficit-based approach, of course, is useful in some contexts. For example, in the emphasis on eliminating health disparities, which has become a guiding policy in local, state, and federal agencies health service programs and priorities, the value we place on social justice in health care is well served by a deficit-based approach to health planning and priority setting.

Behavioral health programs, particularly in the area of substance abuse prevention, also employ a deficit-based approach, with interventions that focus exclusively on people who have been identified as high risk. However, this approach tends to dedicate the most intense resources to the fewest number of people in a target population.

Although the deficit-based approach has had a productive history in helping focus health and social welfare programs, we have seen an unavoidable downside to the approach in our work with Alaska Native and American Indian populations. Because it highlights health problems that disproportionately affect Native Americans, these populations are repeatedly reminded of their differential, usually lower, health status. This focus on disparity allows a channeling of resources to these areas, but it also emphasizes

**A resiliency approach, on the other hand, while still focusing on health problems, views the communities as capable of improving their own health.**

the populations' insufficiency. A resiliency approach, on the other hand, while still bringing focus to health problems, views communities as capable of improving their own health.

A resiliency- or asset-based approach to health planning is a positive alternative to deficit-based planning not only for indigenous populations, but also for any community facing population health problems. This approach is based on the belief that communities have access to the strengths and capacities of the citizens and associations of that community and that the assets of a community's institutions can be identified and mobilized to address threats to the community's health and welfare.

Resilient individuals and communities are better able to withstand hardship, repair themselves, bounce back, and grow. Resilient people, and communities, become stronger as a result of coping with stressful things in life. The asset model used in Alaska, which was developed by the Search Institute Youth Developmental Assets Framework, is a great example of how communities can effectively promote the positive attributes that protect their health and welfare in the long run.

Resiliency-based planning emphasizes cultural value systems and ways of knowing. It includes broad-based skill building, refusal skills, and promotion of appropriate lifestyles and choices. An asset-based approach can be thought of as an immunization or vaccination against real or perceived threats. Such an approach is particularly useful in the long run for protecting a population's health, since it affects more than an individual or a small collection of health problems that a community may face.

We have found that in addition to being more robust in their ability to protect the public health and welfare, resiliency options are more acceptable to Native Americans. For many years, the deficit-based approach has caused considerable embarrassment to populations who are at extreme deficit. A resiliency-based approach emphasizes the positive aspects of any community's efforts to protect and strengthen its population. Extensive social networks, natural support systems, and strong cultural values are sources of strength. Working with and promoting these sources of strength can improve resiliency and protect the health and welfare of a population.

Deficit-based planning emphasizes weaknesses and highlights problems, an approach that can have a demoralizing effect on a community. Asset-based models appear to offer an alternative way of prioritizing health programs and promoting health not only on an individual level but throughout communities. ■

## Authors

Brian Saylor, PhD, MPH, is director of the Institute for Circumpolar Health Studies, University of Alaska Anchorage. Kathy Graves, PhD, MSW, is with AnPsych (Alaska Natives into Psychology), University of Alaska Anchorage. Patricia Cochran is executive director with the Alaska Native Science Commission.