

Strong Heart, Body, Mind, and Spirit

Building Resilience and Facilitating Recovery in Native Youth

Cheri Hample
Anita Didrickson

Alaska Native youth face serious challenges with substance abuse and juvenile delinquency. Many factors contribute to the problem, including geographic isolation, lack of economic opportunities, availability of drugs and alcohol, family alcohol and drug use and abuse, disinterest in school, and early initiation of use.

Data from the 2003 Alaska Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) indicate nearly 40 percent of high school students had a least one drink of alcohol in the past 30 days, with 27 percent reporting binge drinking. After alcohol, marijuana is the most common drug used by Alaska youth; 4 percent report current use.

Analysis of the Alaska juvenile justice system population shows a disproportionate number of Alaska Natives. The most current data, from 2000, indicate that the Alaska Division of Juvenile Justice received one delinquency report for every 17 Caucasian youths but one report for every 7 Alaska Native youths. Alaska Native youths are also overrepresented in Against Person and Drug/Alcohol charges as well as among youth on probation.

To resist substance abuse and behavior problems, youth need internal and external strengths or assets. External assets include community support, empowerment, boundaries, high parent/teacher expectations, and constructive use of time. Youth also need internal assets such as commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity. By strengthening their assets, youth are better able to resist substance abuse and behavior problems.

Behavioral health programs

Substance abuse prevention and treatment infrastructure can be limited in parts of Alaska. Many communities have limited or no law



SouthEast Alaska Regional Health Consortium

Raven's Way students hike into the forest for a wilderness experience.

enforcement, minimal access to mental health and substance abuse services, and often no access to networking with other communities.

SouthEast Alaska Regional Health Consortium (SEARHC) a nonprofit tribal health care organization (www.searhc.org), provides comprehensive health services to Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian, and other Native people of Southeast Alaska. The organization offers a continuum of care for youth, ranging from Behavioral Health Prevention (BHP) programs in local communities, to the Raven's Way (Yéil Jeeyáx) Adolescent Residential Treatment Program for substance abuse and co-occurring disorders.

The Behavioral Health Prevention Department focuses on early intervention and prevention to build assets and resiliency in youth. Community-based prevention specialists work with youth on life skills, promoting bonding and attachment and assisting youth in learning and embracing healthy beliefs and standards. The prevention specialists also collaborate with other SEARHC departments and community-based organizations (tribal, social services, coalitions, and schools) to provide prevention services.

The BHP Department has projects and staff in four Southeast Alaska communities: Angoon, Kake, Klukwan, and Haines.

Angoon (population 481; 170 children aged 5–19), located on Admiralty Island, is home to the Xóotsnoowú Tlingit tribe. Efforts focus on promoting reading as a protective factor and on providing healthy, substance-free community and youth activities that incorporate a prevention message. A flashlight walk, for example, is a creative activity that allows youth to “find their way” as they encounter barriers to healthy behavior. A new BHP project, based in the high school, involves youth writing and announcing substance abuse prevention messages over the local

Citizens Band (CB) radio with plans also to use the local public access television station.

Kake (population 663; 153 children aged 5–19), located on Kupreanof Island, is a traditional Tlingit community. A community-based prevention specialist works closely with the Kake school and teaches a life skills curriculum in grades 1 to 12. The Kake Healing Heart Coalition collaborates with SEARHC to provide community-based substance-free activities with a prevention message, such as the annual week-long Kake culture camp. Kake is also the site for Across Ages, a mentoring program that trains adult mentors who in turn support youth through role modeling, advocating, nurturing, and providing academic help.

Klukwan (population 119; 41 children aged 5–19), located on the Chilkat River, is a traditional Tlingit village. A prevention specialist provides services and programs in the school and the community. Efforts are based in traditional Tlingit culture and include a community service group for elders, Tlingit language and subsistence camps, and a culturally based life skills curriculum for elementary and middle school students.

Haines (population 1,562; 304 children aged 5–19) is the home of the Chilkoot tribe. The prevention specialist works closely with local schools to provide Protecting You/Protecting Me, a best practice alcohol use prevention curriculum for grades 1 to 5. The Haines specialist also provides training and education related to Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. The BHP Department is collaborating with the Haines Voices Project, which includes the Haines Library and Lynn Canal Broadcasting (KHNS-FM), to use story telling, music, and art to increase drug and alcohol education and awareness in the community.

Building assets through residential treatment

Youth who do develop significant substance abuse problems may be referred to the Raven's Way (Yéil Jeeyáx) Residential Treatment Program located in Sitka.

Raven's Way is nationally recognized as a model treatment program for youth. Established in 1989, Raven's Way is accredited by the Commission for the Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities, licensed by the state Office of Children's Services, and certified by the state Division of Behavioral Health. As part of the Sitka School District, its students receive academic credit for participation.

The staff of more than 20 includes a licensed psychologist, licensed therapists, certified substance abuse counselors, wilderness expedition specialists, administrative support staff, intake and follow-up specialists, and a certified teacher.

A cohort of 10 students participates in each 40-day course. Building assets is a core value of the Raven's Way approach and is consistent with Native values of wellness and recovery. Teamwork and leadership are developed through shared living in a coed, family-style residence, cooperative games, and ropes course activities. During the 14- to 20-day wilderness expedition, students hike or kayak and have a three-day solo wilderness experience. Cultural activities include talking circles, sweat lodge, pouch-making, drumming, and drum-making. The program has four phases.

- **Phase One** (in Sitka): Orientation and assessment, basic skills development (relationship, group, and wilderness skills), detoxification.
- **Phase Two** (on Biorka Island): Developing mastery, deeper work begins, emotional and group issues surface.
- **Phase Three** (wilderness expedition): Intense work on all levels, wilderness expedition, solo.

Indicators of Program Graduates' Success

Indicator	Percent of graduates after treatment
30 hours a week or more of productive activity (school, work, volunteer, or subsistence)	61
Improved legal status	68
Improved relationships	81
Improved support for sobriety	90
Improved sense of connectedness or spirituality	70

- **Phase Four** (in Sitka): Closure and preparation for life after treatment, aftercare planning, graduation.

The medicine wheel is the model for developing strength in all areas of life. Students strengthen their bodies through being alcohol and drug free, morning runs, hiking, kayaking, sound nutrition (no caffeine, little sugar or fat), and regular sleep. They strengthen their minds through participation in school, planning, problem solving, treatment homework, and reading. They strengthen their hearts through group, individual, and family counseling, small group feedback, close relationship development, talking circles, and storytelling. Finally, students strengthen their spirits through prayer or moments of silence, sweat lodge, talking circles, drumming, and the pouch ceremony.

From 1989 through 2006, a total of 982 youth participated in the Raven's Way treatment program. Admissions represent 134 Alaska communities; 85 percent were Alaska Native/American Indian.

Data strongly support the effectiveness of the Raven's Way approach. Of those youth admitted from 1989 through June 2006, 82 percent completed the program. During this same period, 90 percent of the 236 youth contacted one year after discharge reported using less or no alcohol, and 89 percent reported using less or no drugs than before treatment. (*See box for other indicators of program success.*)

The SouthEast Alaska Regional Health Consortium and its programs are strongly committed to helping youth acquire the skills and resources they need to have a strong heart, strong body, strong mind, and strong spirit. Building assets, "Alaskan style" helps youth generate the resilience they need to prepare for the future. As an anonymous Alaskan once said, "Like a dream catcher, assets are the supporting threads in a young person's life that can keep away harm and invite goodness. Whatever it is you want from young people, you must give them." ■

Authors

Cheri Hample, MPH, MSW, is program coordinator of SEARHC's Behavioral Health Prevention Department (cheri.hample@searhc.org); Anita Didrickson, PhD, is program coordinator of Raven's Way (anita.didrickson@searhc.org).

Funding for Behavioral Health Prevention Projects is provided by State of Alaska, DHSS, Division of Behavioral Health, Prevention; US Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP); and Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority (AMHTA). Funding for Raven's Way is provided by the State of Alaska Division of Behavioral Health and the Indian Health Service.