

# TIPS FOR NON-NATIVE MEDICAL PROVIDERS WORKING IN ALASKA NATIVE COMMUNITIES

- ▶ **Keep in mind that you are the ‘stranger’.** Being ‘too familiar’ right off will only make you seem suspicious.
- ▶ **Adjust to the pace of the community.** Do not attempt to rush anything unless it’s absolutely necessary; when you realize that small communities are less dependent on the clock you are likely to neither suffer or inflict stress about time.
- ▶ **Be respectful at all times.** Do not assume that you are ‘right’, ‘needed’ or that you should be in control. Although you will be looked at as a person in an authoritative position, don’t assume control of all situations; wait to be asked for your input.
- ▶ **Listen.** Be aware of the way people communicate, how they share experiences, laughter and concerns.
- ▶ **Go slowly – be aware of your actions.** Be cautious about attempts to change systems already in place. Most people in rural villages make connections through many years of contact and familial connections; learn these connections and the intricacies involved with each before deciding it needs to be changed.
- ▶ **Speak calmly and allow time for response.** Even when English appears to be fluent, translation can be an important tool to gain rapport and show respect. Many Native people in Alaska, especially in rural villages, are bilingual, with their Native language being their primary conversational language. Although English is used when speaking to non-Native people with fluency, keep in mind that Native people often have to interpret English into their language and concepts to determine a response, and then interpret it back into English to reply to you. This takes time, and can be frustrating if the provider is trying to rush a response. Native Children also often may use their Native words more than English for concepts or familiar topics, and not be able to translate this into English. Offer to provide a translator, whenever possible, for intake and routine medical exams where technical words and concepts as well as historical facts will be discussed.
- ▶ **Explain your role and services.** Do not assume that everyone understands what you are there for. Tell them how long you expect to be there, where you’ve come from, and what your work has been in the past.
- ▶ **Be personable.** Be willing to share a bit about your own family. One of the main ways people in a village greet someone new is to ask who their family is. Even if you aren’t related to anyone there, people may ask about the kind of family you come from. In subsequent meetings, people may inquire about your family as a way of greeting and showing friendship.

◆ **Avoid professional jargon.** Remember that some people may be unfamiliar with long or profession- specific words. Explain any written forms. Using commonly used, easily recognizable terms will be appreciated. Ask the client or patient to repeat instructions in their own words to be sure they understand, and provide an opportunity for clarification. For example, there are also many different words in the medical language that can describe the same illness or disease, so if you need to use specific terminology about a medical condition, let the client or patient know how other professionals might refer to it that way. This is especially important if it's something traumatic and life changing, like a tumor. It is important to be sure the implications of the term are understood as well. A tumor may also be referred to as cancer, which is often considered terminal, without further explanation. If clients/patients understand the use of terms that they might hear from other professionals (if referred to another facility) they will experience less stress if they have a clear understanding.

◆ **Make yourself available.** Accept that appointments may not always be kept. It may take several attempts. Sometimes in villages, family needs take priority, or an employer makes demands that prevent a person from taking time off work.

◆ **Spend time in informal social activities with staff and tribal community members.** Talk, listen, be seen and help out. Many of the public gatherings in small communities are for people to meet the new people who will be either living there or spending some time there. The more familiar you are to the people the more they will be able to help you as well as let you help them.

◆ **Be Flexible.** Be prepared to change gears during tribal events. Be willing to pitch in. In a small community, many of the jobs that people hold are dangerous. If there should happen to be a medical emergency, it is likely that the whole community and anything going on will be put on hold. Much the same if it's a particular season in the area, all places have certain times of the year when certain types of food are available to be gathered. Realize that this is a way of life for the people and that they will likely put off other things that you might consider important so that they can gather the foods to see their families through the long winter months.

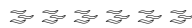
◆ **Develop team relationships** with the local staff who can help you learn about culturally appropriate service approaches, ask for feedback and don't let yourself become isolated. Get to know the people you are working with, especially those who are from the village/community or have been there a long time. If you have a question about how to deal with certain people, these resource people will usually already know what procedures work best. Ask for feedback from co-workers and leaders as well. Do not let yourself become isolated, and do not operate too independently.

◆ **Respect traditional beliefs and practices.** Just as in any indigenous culture, there are certain Native traditional beliefs and practices that are still held on to today. You may not understand, and may even think that some of these ways are not appropriate. Remember, in most cases, the people have lived with these ways for hundreds of years. Learn as much as you can about the Spiritual beliefs and practices for the areas you are working in. And remember that these are lifetime traditions passed down from parents, aunts and uncles, grandparents and in many cases, great-grandparents.

◆ **Remember that spiritual matters may be private.** Do not pry. Watch, express respectful interest and wait to be told. In some cultures it is not appropriate to allow people who are not from the community to attend or witness certain ceremonies; other cultural events may be open to everyone. It is a good idea to attend when invited, if possible. Also, spending time with and learning from the elders in any culture is always a good idea.

◆ **Learn who is related to whom and how this affects social roles.** Also be aware of the relationship your predecessor (if applicable) had with the community and specific families. Getting the history of the people in the community through co-workers and collaborating service providers is invaluable information. If the reports involve negative comments, keep in mind that there could be a history of bad relations between certain families and/or groups of people.

◆ **Be careful what you say about people, and remember that your attitudes and ability to honor confidentiality will be examined.** If you are new to a community, there is a certain basic trust that you are granted as you begin to work with the people. Native people will usually give you the benefit of the doubt at first. This is why you must understand relationships and social structures as well: even among co-workers, the person you are speaking with may be related to the person you are discussing. Your ability to keep patient confidentiality will be scrutinized constantly and frequently; it is critical that you establish plainly and visibly that you will not ever release or voice any confidential information, especially embarrassing information, to the general public. If you have a significant other that is also a part of the community, realize that anything you might tell him/her, might be unwittingly divulged and if this happens, your credibility will be decreased, if not lost entirely. If you have a comfortable attitude about the community, it will be transferred to it's members and they will be more willing to come to you for help.



## When Working with Traumatized Native Children and Their Non-offending Family Members, I will.....

- ▶ Acknowledge that Native peoples are not all the same;
- ▶ Acknowledge that my own heritage and history impacts how I view others;
- ▶ Respect the historical basis for Native distrust of the non-Native system;
- ▶ Acknowledge that I may make the child and the family uncomfortable because they are not used to dealing with strangers about intimate and personal issues;
- ▶ Ask questions and do research to understand the child's specific heritage, including primary and secondary language, special events and celebrations, religious beliefs, extended family network and community demographics;
- ▶ Seek input and advice from Native people of that culture to be sure I understand the child's context and recognize all support systems available to the child;
- ▶ Recognize that cultural protocols (for example, it may be disrespectful for an adult or child to look directly at the person talking to them) most often guide the unspoken behavior rather than willful disrespect or lack of cooperation. **NOTE:** "eye contact" protocol is NOT universally the same for all Native people, so be aware of the possibility that lack of eye contact may also indicate fear and distrust;
- ▶ Accept that the family and the Tribe may have different values and beliefs than I do (such as a definition of that is much broader than the "nuclear family" concept);
- ▶ Recognize that some Native parents are disconnected from their heritage and refrain from drawing conclusions about their commitment to their child based on an apparent lack of involvement with their culture or extended family (if applicable);
- ▶ Look at the *long-term* social, emotional, spiritual and identity needs of Native children vs. only the time they are involved with "the system".