$1.4 million project funds suicide prevention efforts

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: Dec. 19, 2011
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Fairbanks, Alaska—The Center for Alaska Native Health Research at the University of Alaska Fairbanks has received $1.4 million to support rural Southwestern Alaska Yup’ik communities in their suicide and substance abuse prevention efforts.

The award will supplement a CANHR research program exploring how Alaska Native people are using ancestral knowledge and cultural traditions to promote well being in young people and their families.

“It’s been working for thousands of years,” said Ray Oney, acting city manager for the City of Alakanuk, referring to traditional Yup’ik ways. “People would come together and work it out. We’re using that method in keeping our community members in tune with one another.”

Alakanuk, a Yup’ik community on the Yukon River, was one of two villages that collaborated with CANHR to design their own prevention program, grounded in the idea that communities can solve their own problems using their indigenous heritage. This approach was developed as part of a program of CANHR research funded by the National Institute of Minority Health and Health Disparities. It has become a model for other community prevention efforts.

Alakanuk has recently celebrated four years since the last suicide, Oney said. “It’s time to go out and teach other villages.”

The award will not directly support research, but will instead be used to hire additional rural project staff, to develop a training center to bring the project to new communities and to sustain and expand prevention project activities over the next three years, according to Stacy Rasmus, the project’s co-principal investigator and an assistant research professor at UAF’s Institute of Arctic Biology.

The program is based on the qasgiq, or the men’s house, which was both a place and a way for for Yup’ik people to gather for educational, spiritual and entertainment purposes, said Billy Charles, the prevention trial research coordinator and co-investigator for the CANHR project. Using the concept of qasgiq, people come together, discuss an issue and decide which traditional activities, such as ice safety, seal hunting or berry picking, to use to teach Yup’ik values that promote reasons for life.
“It’s better than sitting and listening to a lecture,” Charles said. “What a person gets out of a story becomes their own.”

The Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation received the funding from the state of Alaska and passed the funds through to UAF for the three-year project.

“The state has become another resource for these local efforts,” Rasmus said. “It’s about reviving culture and tradition in the ways that used to keep families and children safe and healthy.”

- 30 -

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DC/12-19-11/IXX-12