

Rural Health Transformation Program (RHTP) Advisory Council

Council Meeting Minutes

Date: March 20, 2026

Location: Virtual

Meeting Attendance

RHTP Advisory Council Members

Name	Organization	Title	Attendance
Deputy Commissioner Emily Ricci	Alaska Department of Health	Chair	Present
Nils Andreassen	Alaska Municipality League	Member	Present
Senator Cathy Giessel	Alaska State Senate	Member	Present
Jared Kosin	Alaska Hospital & Healthcare Association	Member	Present
Monique Martin	Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium	Member	Present
Representative Genevieve Mina	Alaska State House	Member	Present
Tari O'Connor, designee for Nancy Merriman	Alaska Primary Care Association	Member	Present
Mary Wilson Katie Baldwin- Johnson, designee for Mary Wilson	Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority	Member	Present

State of Alaska, Office of the Commissioner Staff

Name	Title
Tricia Franklin	Project Coordinator, Rural Health Transformation
Dana Loutey	Project Coordinator, Health Care Savings
Shirley Sakaye	Director of Communications
Leah Van Kirk	Health Care Policy Advisor
Eva Venema	Project Coordinator, Health Care Savings
Betsy Wood	Director, Health Care Savings

Meeting Summary

Emily Ricci, Deputy Commissioner, Alaska Department of Health, opened the meeting, confirmed that a quorum was present, and provided an overview of the purpose and role of the Advisory Council. She explained that the Council serves in an advisory capacity to the Commissioner and is intended to provide structured input on the design and

implementation of the Rural Health Transformation Program (RHTP). Deputy Commissioner Ricci noted that meetings would initially follow an informal version of Robert's Rules of Order to support efficient discussion while maintaining transparency and structure. She then provided additional context on the RHTP, emphasizing the urgency of federal timelines associated with the program and the need to move forward expeditiously while still incorporating stakeholder input. She stated that the development of a clear and well-defined evaluation framework is critical to ensuring that funding decisions are aligned with program goals and federal expectations. Deputy Commissioner Ricci underscored that the Department is seeking to balance speed with thoughtful design and noted that the framework must be flexible enough to apply across Alaska's diverse geographic and service delivery contexts.

Betsy Wood, Director, Health Care Savings, Alaska Department of Health, presented the Project Evaluation Framework and Portfolio Analysis Framework. She explained that both frameworks were developed through an iterative process that incorporated feedback from stakeholders, subject matter experts, and public comment. Betsy stated that the evaluation framework includes multiple criteria, with alignment to RHTP initiatives carrying the greatest weight, followed by considerations such as impact, feasibility, and sustainability. She emphasized that the intent of the funding is to support innovative approaches that can be tested and, if successful, scaled over time. Betsy also noted that the Department recognizes that not all strong ideas will align with the specific goals of the RHTP and that prioritization will be necessary.

Monique Martin, Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, asked how the Department plans to identify and select members for the stakeholder committee and emphasized the importance of ensuring that the selection process is transparent, inclusive, and representative of Alaska's diverse communities. Monique expressed that clarity in this process will be important for maintaining trust and encouraging meaningful participation from stakeholders across the state.

Emily Ricci responded that the Department is actively working to develop a transparent and inclusive process for stakeholder engagement and acknowledged the importance of clearly communicating how participants are selected. She noted that additional information would be shared as the process is finalized and emphasized the Department's intent to include a broad range of perspectives.

Betsy Wood continued the presentation by providing additional detail on how the evaluation framework is structured and how it will be applied during the review process. She reiterated that the framework is intended to guide consistent decision-making while

remaining flexible enough to account for the unique characteristics of different projects and communities. Betsy also emphasized that the framework is not static and will continue to be refined based on feedback and lessons learned during implementation.

Monique Martin raised the importance of travel within Alaska's healthcare system and noted that travel is a significant driver of cost and burden for both patients and providers. She suggested that reducing the need for travel by bringing care closer to communities should be considered a key outcome within the evaluation framework. Monique further noted that improvements in access may not always be reflected in traditional utilization metrics and encouraged the Department to consider how to capture these impacts more effectively.

Emily Ricci acknowledged Monique's comments and agreed that improving access to care, including reducing travel burdens, is closely aligned with the goals of the RHTP. She noted that the Department will consider how to better reflect these outcomes within the evaluation criteria.

Nils Andreassen, Alaska Municipal League, stated that the concept of transformation should be viewed as an iterative and long-term process rather than a short-term outcome. He emphasized that expectations for transformation must be grounded in the baseline capacity of individual communities, noting that some communities are still working to establish basic services and infrastructure. Nils indicated that achieving meaningful change in these settings may take several years and that the evaluation framework should account for this reality.

Emily Ricci agreed with Nils' comments and reiterated that transformation may look different depending on the starting point of each community. She noted that the Department intends to recognize both incremental improvements and larger-scale innovations as valid forms of progress within the program.

Betsy Wood added that the funding is intended to function as seed or startup capital, supporting early-stage ideas that have the potential to grow and scale over time. She emphasized that the program is designed to encourage innovation while also building toward longer-term system improvements.

Nils Andreassen raised concerns about the evidentiary burden placed on applicants, particularly smaller organizations that may lack the resources or capacity to collect and analyze data. He suggested that requiring extensive documentation or proof of effectiveness could create barriers to participation and recommended that the

Department and its partners take on a greater role in providing data, analysis, or evidence to support applicants.

Tari O'Connor, Alaska Primary Care Association, expressed agreement with Nils' concerns and emphasized the importance of ensuring that smaller and community-based organizations are not disadvantaged in the application process. She noted that these organizations often have deep knowledge of community needs but may lack administrative capacity. Tari suggested that larger or regional organizations could play a role in supporting smaller entities with data reporting, compliance, and other administrative requirements.

Betsy Wood acknowledged these concerns and stated that the Department is actively considering how to balance the need for accountability and measurable outcomes with the need to reduce administrative burden. She noted that flexibility in reporting requirements may be necessary to ensure broad participation while still maintaining program integrity.

Mary Wilson, Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority, asked how the Department plans to ensure that key strategic priorities are addressed if they are not reflected in the projects submitted through the Letter of Intent process. She expressed interest in understanding how the Department will identify and address gaps in areas such as value-based care or other system priorities.

Betsy Wood responded that the Department is currently relying on the Letter of Intent process to surface ideas from across the state and to better understand where there is interest and capacity. She acknowledged, however, that this approach may not fully capture all strategic priorities and noted that the Department may need to consider additional mechanisms in future funding cycles to ensure that critical gaps are addressed.

Monique Martin suggested that the evaluation framework should focus on populations experiencing disparate health outcomes rather than relying on predefined or rigid population categories. She noted that individuals often fall into multiple categories and that a more flexible approach would better align with both community realities and federal guidance.

Emily Ricci agreed that focusing on populations with disparate outcomes aligns with CMS priorities and indicated that the Department would consider this feedback as it continues to refine the framework.

Jared Kosin, Alaska Hospital and Healthcare Association, highlighted the broader financial and policy context affecting healthcare providers, including anticipated reductions in Medicaid coverage. He noted that these changes are likely to place additional financial strain on providers and may impact their ability to participate in or implement transformation efforts. Jared emphasized that while innovation is important, the framework should account for the operational realities providers are facing.

Emily Ricci acknowledged these concerns and emphasized the importance of designing a program that is both ambitious and realistic. She noted that the Department is aware of these external pressures and will consider them in program implementation.

Betsy Wood reiterated that not all proposals will be funded, particularly if they do not align with the core goals of the RHTP. She emphasized that maintaining a clear focus on program priorities is necessary to ensure that funding achieves its intended impact.

Nils Andreassen emphasized that community-level impacts should be recognized as meaningful, even when they are limited in scale. He reiterated that evaluation criteria should account for differences in community size and capacity and should not disadvantage smaller or rural communities.

Tari O'Connor added that evaluation criteria should allow for meaningful measurement of success in small communities and should recognize the value of projects that may have a smaller reach but significant local impact.

Monique Martin noted that qualitative evidence may be necessary to demonstrate impact in some communities, particularly where quantitative data is limited or difficult to obtain. She emphasized the importance of allowing flexibility in how outcomes are measured and reported.

Emily Ricci summarized the discussion by stating that the evaluation and portfolio frameworks represent a strong starting point but will continue to evolve based on feedback and implementation experience. She noted that the Council's input would be incorporated into the meeting minutes and used to inform future revisions. She concluded the discussion by outlining next steps, including incorporating feedback into the frameworks and scheduling a follow-up meeting within approximately two to three weeks. She noted that the next meeting will include further discussion of the Letter of Intent process and continued refinement of program components.