

FY2023

ANNUAL REPORT



Journey

TO A HEALTHIER FUTURE

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

**past.
present.
future.**

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HISTORY OF HEALTH IN ALASKA

1925: SERUM RUN

A relay of dog teams transported the antitoxin for diphtheria from Nenana to Nome, over 674 miles, through harsh winter conditions.



1946: "SHOT SHIP"

The marine vessel Hygiene, nicknamed the "Shot Ship," sailed to coastal villages providing public health services, such as medical care, nursing and X-ray services to remote locations across Alaska.



1945: FULL-TIME COMMISSIONER APPOINTED

The Territorial Legislature granted legal status to create a state health department and appoint a full-time Health Commissioner.



1964: FOOD STAMP ACT

Congress permanently established the Food Stamp Program and authorized expansion to all states.



1994: HEALTHY ALASKANS FORMED

The first State Health Improvement Plan, Healthy Alaskans, is created, primarily focused on the areas of health promotion, health protection and preventive services. Healthy Alaskans continues to provide measurable objectives to improve overall health of our residents.



2020: COVID ARRIVES IN ALASKA

Since 2019, Alaska has seen over 300,000 cases of COVID.

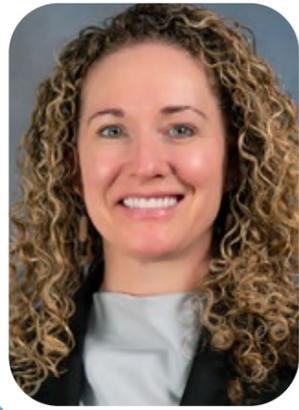


2022: DEPARTMENT SPLIT

Department of Health and Social Services splits into Department of Health and Department of Family and Community Services.



Becoming the Department of Health



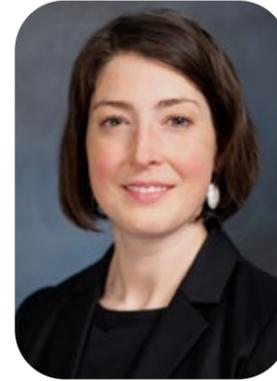
Commissioner
Heidi Hedberg



On March 19, 2022, Governor Mike Dunleavy’s Executive Order 121 was signed into law, reorganizing the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) by creating two new departments: the Department of Family and Community Services (DFCS) and the Department of Health (DOH). The administrative team within DHSS Financial Management Services completed this immense body of work by the deadline of July 1, 2022, only 104 days later.

Standing on its own for the first time, under the leadership of Commissioner Heidi Hedberg, DOH began Fiscal Year 2023 (FY2023) implementing continual ease-of-use improvements, both internally and externally. Efforts to unwind from the impacts of the federal public health emergency (PHE) and the 2021 cyberattack were continuous arcs of effort. FY2023 was a strong financial year for DOH. Through numerous cost-saving efforts and reimbursements, such as Tribal reclaiming, pharmacy rebates and audits, our collaborative efforts saved Alaskans almost \$85 million.

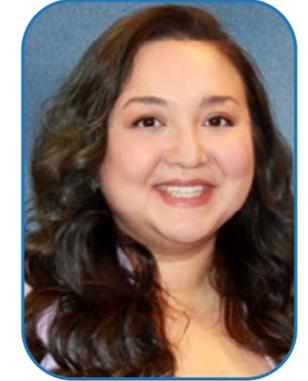
Department of Health Sprints



Emily Ricci
**Deputy
Commissioner**



Dr. Anne Zink
**Chief
Medical Officer**



Josephine Stern
**Assistant
Commissioner**



Lindsay Kato
**Director
Public Health**



Deb Etheridge
**Director
Public Assistance**



Tracy Dompeling
**Director
Behavioral Health**



Renee Gayhart
**Director
Health Care Services**

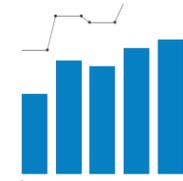


Tony Newman
**Director
Senior and
Disabilities Services**

Medicaid Postpartum Extension

Regulation updates have been completed to improve telehealth coverage and extend postpartum coverage. The extension of postpartum benefits took place on February 1, 2024, a full five months earlier than anticipated.

As part of the Governor's Healthy Families Initiative, Governor Dunleavy introduced Senate Bill 58 (SB58) during the 2023 legislative session, which was widely supported by the Alaska Legislature. This bill increased maternal health care access in Alaska by extending coverage for pregnant women from 60 days to 12 months after the end of pregnancy and by increasing the income limit coverage from 200% of the federal poverty level to 225%. Many women who experience postpartum complications are not diagnosed within 60 days of birth. Extending coverage provides new mothers additional support for their health, improving outcomes for the mother and her baby.



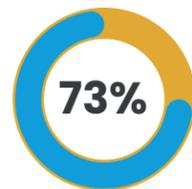
Mental health conditions contributed to **31%** of pregnancy-associated deaths in AK between 2014-2018.



14% of Alaskan mothers had symptoms of postpartum depression in 2020.



In 2021, Alaska's overall pregnancy-associated death rate exceeded the previous 5-year average by **109%**.



From 2015-2019, **73%** of new mother deaths occurred more than 6 weeks post-delivery.



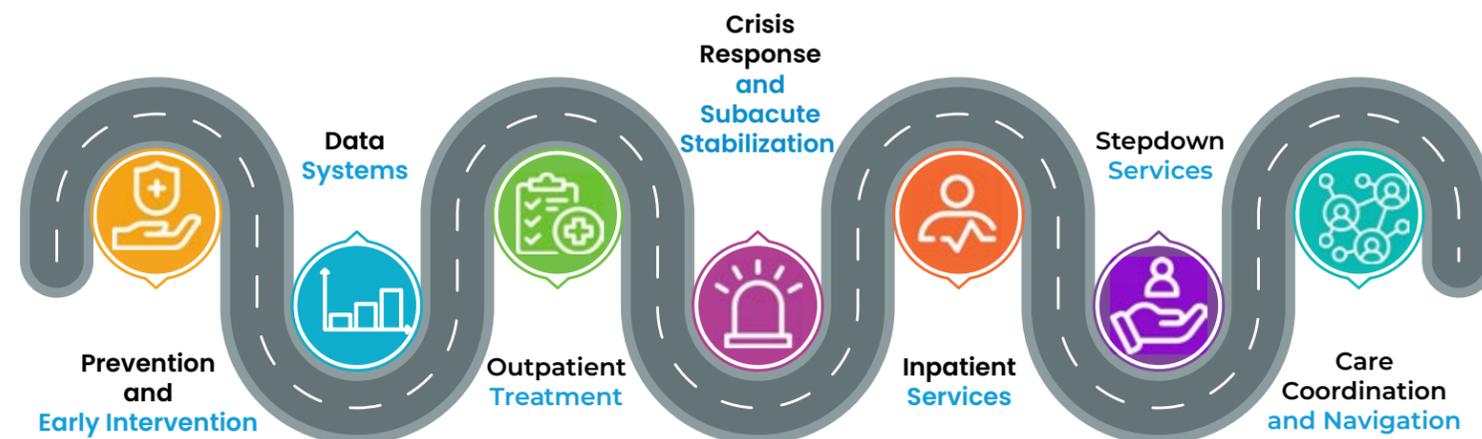
Parental enrollment in Medicaid is associated with a **29%** higher probability that a child will receive an annual well-child visit.

Behavioral Health Youth Roadmap

The increased saturation of social media, rise in the availability of controlled substances with unknown additives, young people returning to in-person learning and other in-person interactions have compounded the need for support to address mental health needs for Alaska's youth. We recognize this acute problem and understand that solutions that may be a support for one region may not be the most appropriate for another.

Each community's needs are best determined by the people who live there. To understand these needs, DOH facilitated five regional meetings, attended by DOH divisional leadership and staff, as well as community members and leaders. At these meetings, participants discussed what was working and what was lacking in the current youth behavioral health model and deliberated on possible strategies to fill these gaps. With these multi-day workshops and listening sessions complete, DOH staff are compiling the information to frame the road map that will lead to healthier outcomes for our youth in the future.

AREAS OF FOCUS:



Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

The number of applicants for both the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Medicaid grew during the PHE, as more Alaskans had greater assistance needs. Many of the departments' outdated technology systems could not keep up. Due to multiple simultaneous circumstances, SNAP applications became backlogged in August 2022, causing long delays for clients. Compounding the problems, DOH staff were also navigating considerable staffing shortages and outdated technology systems. While these challenges were significant, they were not without solutions. The Alaska Legislature approved the reallocation of \$1.68 million to support these solutions.



Bolster Depleted Food Banks Across the State

Increase Staff

Update Information Technology Systems

Increase Resiliency

Improve Customer Service

Medicaid Renewals

During the federal PHE, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS), allowed all Medicaid clients to stay on Medicaid without needing to renew. This meant that about one-third of Alaskans were on Medicaid at the height of the PHE. With the conclusion of the PHE in April 2023, all states were required to resume the renewal process. Alaska's expansive rural nature, subsistence lifestyles and other factors led DOH to ask for and receive an extended timeline to complete this massive effort. We remain committed and focused to ensure every eligible Alaskan remains covered by Medicaid by February 2025.

During the PHE, many recipients moved, making their contact information inaccurate, leaving DPA without a way to contact them. A comprehensive communication plan to raise awareness about the renewal process was initiated by engaging partners, providers and the general public, through bus and airport signage, social media posts, advertisements in traditional and digital media, and more.



ENGLISH

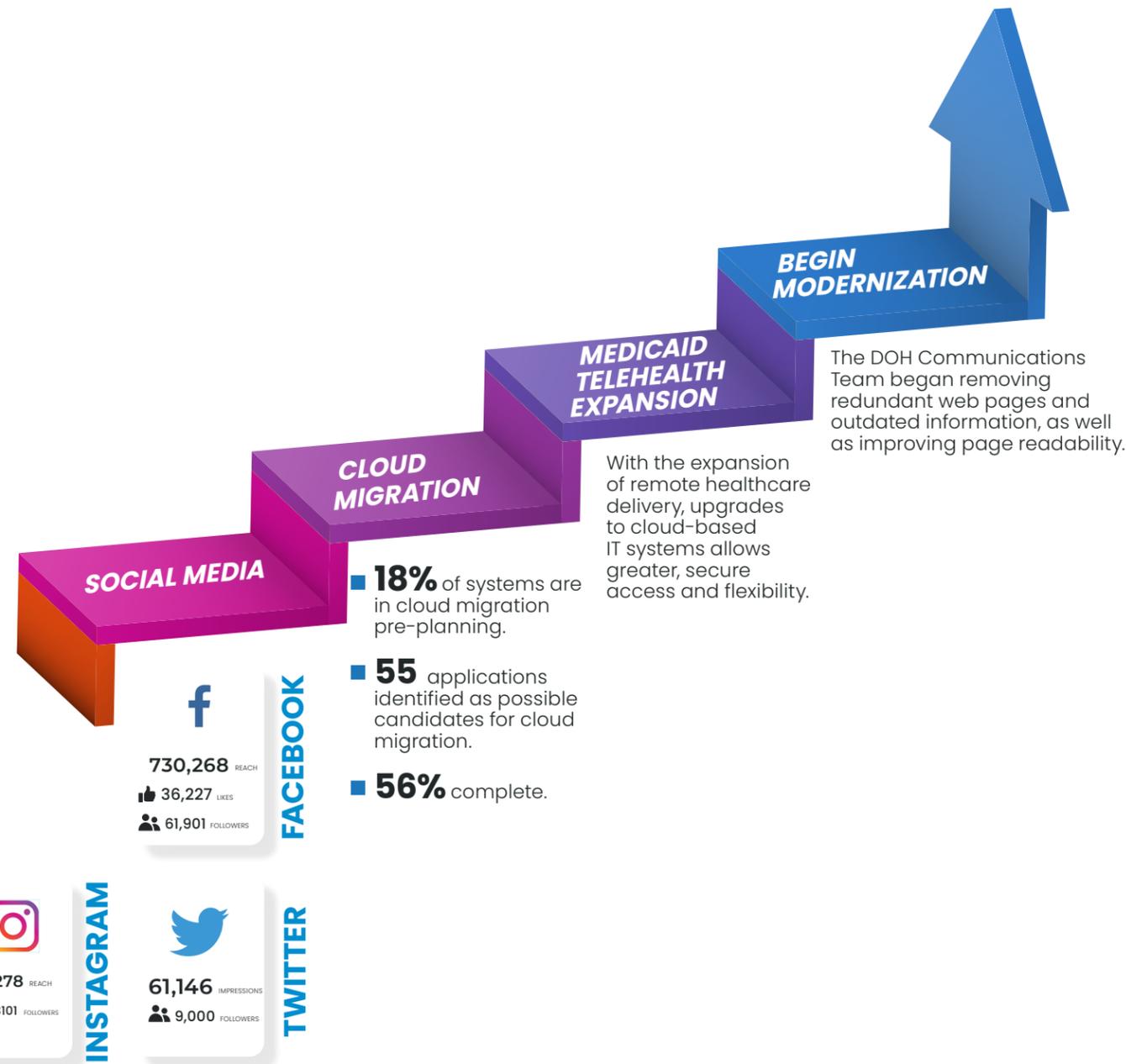


ESPAÑOL 한국어 РУССКИЙ



SAMOAN TAGALOG YUP'IK

Modernization Steps



New Medicaid Fiscal Agent

Historically, the Division of Health Care Services (HCS) has contracted with a single vendor to provide Medicaid Management Information System (MMIS) and fiscal agent services. On April 1, 2024, the results of a multiyear effort were realized when HCS transitioned fiscal agent services to a separate vendor, HMS, a Gainwell Technologies Company (HMS), while continuing its partnership with Conduent to run the MMIS services. HMS has decades of experience delivering vital support such as processing, provider enrollment, service authorization, and provider training to state Medicaid programs. During the first year of this collaboration, HCS and HMS focused on improving the Medicaid provider experience through expanded modes of communication, simplified authorization processes and expedited claims resolution. As the partnership moves into its second year, HCS and HMS are committed to continued focus on providing quality support to our providers who serve Alaska's Medicaid recipients.



30,000
Enrolled Providers



260,000
Alaska Medicaid recipients



Average of
\$45,000,000
a week in provider payments



Project Hope and Project Gabe

The department's Project Hope distributed 45,000 overdose response kits in 2023. Through partnerships with organizations throughout Alaska, Project Hope provides harm reduction resources such as overdose education and naloxone kits. Naloxone, a medication for reversing the effects of opioid overdose, saves lives. Every additional day added to a life is another day the person can choose to enter treatment. Project Gabe, created in 2022, builds upon Project Hope to offer seafood and industrial workplaces such as the seafood industry customized support to address unique needs in high-risk industries. to offer seafood and industrial workplaces such as the seafood industry customized support to address the unique needs in high-risk industries..



Continuum of Care

Protecting Alaskans from drugs, including opioids such as fentanyl, requires a convergence of strategies:



1115 Waiver Program

While we are proud of the work that has already been done, there is always room for improvement. Efforts like the Section 1115 Substance Use Disorder Treatment and Behavioral Health Program demonstration waivers (1115 waiver), enhance the existing behavioral health continuum of care to better meet the needs of Alaskans who experience behavioral health and substance use disorders. Through this 1115 waiver, Alaska is transforming the behavioral health Medicaid system to allow for effective, cost-efficient and high-quality integrated care at the right time and with the right service. The department was required to submit a renewal request to CMS in 2023 and is working through the process of renewing the waiver.

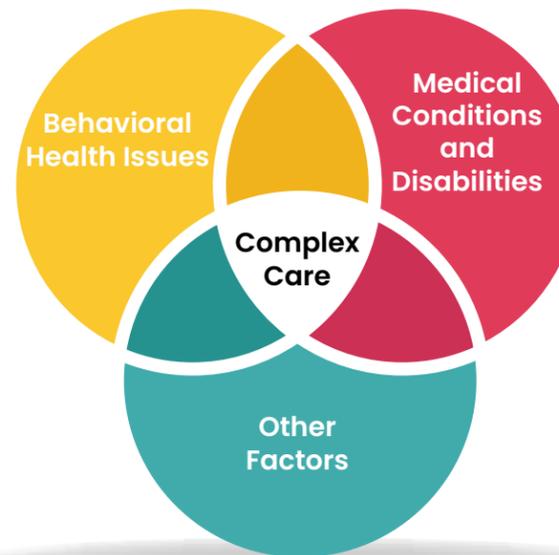


Complex Care

Challenge:

Often, Alaskans on Medicaid with complex behavioral health and medical issues could benefit from home or community-based living. However, without additional coordination of adequate services and supports, they frequently remain in more restrictive environments that lacking an appropriate level of care.

Home and community-based waivers with residential habilitation options limit the age of recipients or rates of reimbursement. Such limits can make providers less willing to accept these individuals into care, or inhibit them from providing adequate service once they have begun care. For example, group home habilitation has been limited to those 18 and older, but many who could benefit from this service are late adolescents. Family home habilitation does not allow for an add-on acuity payment that could make it feasible for a provider to afford increased staffing levels to care for an individual with complex health care needs in a home setting. And providers often lack the support, training and consultative partners they need to help them address problematic behaviors in a way that keeps both clients and staff safe and prevents burnout.



Solution:

The Division of Senior and Disabilities Services (SDS) is making a number of changes to better address these complex needs, using an "Appendix K" disaster flexibility to make changes immediate, and the 1915(c) waiver amendment process to facilitate these changes permanently. The changes will enable SDS to better serve youth aged 16-17 and will provide more flexibility to pay for extra staffing for youth or adults when needed.

Governor’s Task Force on Child Care

An identified challenge facing Alaska is access to high quality and affordable child care. All Alaskans, urban and rural, are experiencing continuously rising costs, lack of providers, and closures of facilities for child care. On April 6, 2023, Governor Mike Dunleavy issued [Administrative Order 346](#), establishing the Governor’s Task Force on Child Care. Department of Health is proud of the emerging work of this taskforce. The task force evaluated the landscape of child care in Alaska from May to November 2023 focusing on determination of pinch points to child care, including barriers to background checks, the licensing process and the lack of an available, qualified workforce.



Pinch Points Identified:

Landscape
- Alaska’s expansive rural areas

Workforce
- Inability to offer competitive wages while maintaining sustainable profit margin

Licensing
- Complex and expensive process

Background Checks
- Too long to complete/return
- Too expensive
- Access to finger-printing prohibitive

Access
- Not enough licensed spaces
- Not enough variety

Subsidy
- Make licensing more cost-effective for providers
- Increase subsidies for working families

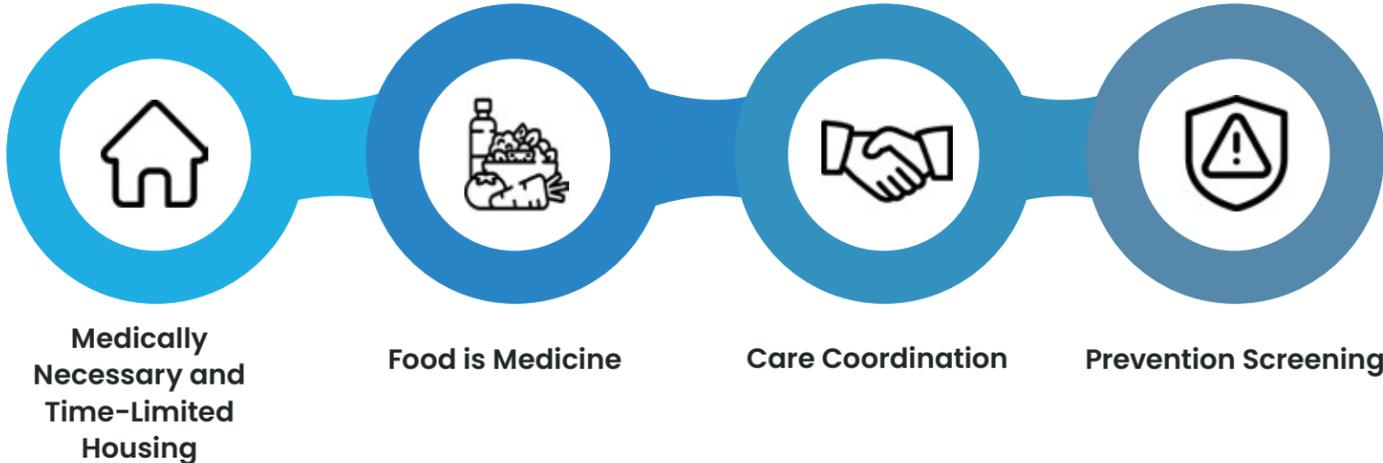
Quality
- Not enough quality providers

After examining these topic areas and listening to providers and parents, the task force developed [33 meaningful](#) recommendations to address the challenges. In early 2024, the task force will resume and focus on the remaining three topics, which include increasing access, quality and subsidies. Supporting these efforts will help to create an environment where healthy families want to live and thrive.

Transformation of Care

In April 2023, DOH began exploring the use of CMS waivers to identify gaps in services, promote better health outcomes, and decrease costs to Medicaid by addressing the health-related social needs of incarcerated populations before individuals re-enter communities.

Health-related Social Needs



Looking to the Future

DOH remains fueled by continuous improvement and constant innovation, even when the road ahead may not always be the smoothest to travel. The reward of providing opportunities for all Alaskans to understand and achieve health, well-being and self-sufficiency propels us to the future.

Continued Website Modernization and Cloud Migration



2024 SNAP Online Interim Report



Update Alaska's Comprehensive Integrated Mental Health Program Plan



Public Assistance Self-Service Portal



Launch New Public Website



Improve Customer Service and Efficiency

Transformation of Care for All Alaskans



Improvements to Child Care



Expand Crisis Services in Communities Across Alaska



Robust Recruitment and Retention Programs



Integrated Eligibility System for all Assistance Programs



Expand 988

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