

# Alaska Has a Rare Opportunity to Transform Rural Health. We Must Think Bigger Than Individual Projects.

By Commissioner Heidi Hedberg

When people hear that Alaska has been awarded \$272 million through the Rural Health Transformation Program, one of the first questions they ask is simple:

What are we going to do with it?

It's an important question. But an even more important one is this:

What kind of health system do we want Alaska to have for our children? Our grandchildren?

The Rural Health Transformation Program is not simply a grant opportunity. It is an opportunity to improve health outcomes, strengthen access to care, and build a more connected and sustainable health system that meets the unique needs across Alaska.

Actively engaging with communities and regions, we are committed to co-developing a strategy that works for us.

We received hundreds of responses to our statewide request for information. We held public meetings and regional conversations. We heard repeatedly about the need to strengthen workforce pipelines, improve access to care, expand behavioral health services, modernize technology, and support local solutions.

The proposals now under review reflect those priorities.

Over the past several months, organizations from every corner of our state submitted nearly 1,800 proposals. Hospitals, Tribal Health Organizations, clinics, local governments, schools, nonprofits, and community partners brought forward ideas that reflect both the challenges and opportunities facing Alaska today.

More than 400 projects have advanced to the next stage of review for this initial round of funding. While some public attention has focused on individual proposals, the real story is much larger.

The goal is not to fund gadgets.

The goal is not to chase the newest technology.

The goal is to make sure these dollars have lasting impact.

For many Alaskans, especially those living in rural and remote communities, accessing health care remains difficult. Long travel distances, workforce shortages, aging infrastructure, behavioral health needs, and rising costs create barriers that can delay care and worsen health outcomes. Access to care is about more than convenience. It can mean the difference between identifying a condition early or facing a medical emergency, receiving behavioral health services when they are needed most, or whether a family must leave its community to seek treatment. One of the greatest opportunities presented by the Rural Health Transformation Program is the ability to strengthen local and regional systems of care so more Alaskans, including Elders, can access high-quality services closer to home whenever possible.

The projects being considered are designed to address those challenges in practical ways.

Some proposals focus on expanding access to primary care and preventive services. Others seek to strengthen behavioral health systems, improve care coordination, support the health workforce, modernize data systems, expand telehealth, or help patients manage chronic conditions before they become emergencies.

Some projects land well outside the traditional definition of “health care”. Addressing individual and system wide ways to improve the overall health of Alaskans through addressing practical everyday needs like child care, home visiting programs, workforce pipelines and other economic opportunities are also represented.

This work recognizes that health care in Alaska looks different than it does in most states. Our communities are separated by vast distances, diverse geography, and unique local needs. Effective solutions must reflect those realities. In many cases, that means investing in approaches that help bring care closer to patients, strengthen regional partnerships, support Tribal and community-based providers, and reduce barriers that have persisted for decades.

A wearable blood pressure monitor is not about technology for technology's sake. It is about helping someone identify and manage chronic conditions from their home.

A drone delivery system is not about innovation for its own sake. It is about getting medications, vaccines, and supplies to communities where weather and geography often stand between patients and care.

A workforce development program is not simply a training initiative. It is an investment in the nurses, behavioral health clinicians, community health aides, and other professionals who will care for Alaskans for decades to come.

Taken individually, these projects may appear modest.

Taken together, they represent an opportunity to build a stronger system.

Health outcomes do not improve because of a single program or a single investment. They improve when communities have access to preventive care, providers can coordinate services, behavioral health care is available, technology connects patients to specialists, and local health systems have the workforce and resources needed to serve their residents.

That is the vision driving this effort.

This work also recognizes an important reality about health care in Alaska: our system is interconnected.

A stronger regional hospital benefits surrounding communities.

A new workforce pipeline in one region helps address needs across the state.

Investments in telehealth, data sharing, and care coordination can ensure patients and their providers have the information when and where they need it.

The Rural Health Transformation Program will not solve every challenge facing Alaska's health system. No single funding source could.

But it does provide a rare opportunity to make meaningful progress on issues that communities, providers, and patients have identified for years.

The decisions ahead are important. We know these investments must create lasting value for Alaskans. We know communities expect measurable results. And we are committed to ensuring every dollar moves us closer to a healthier future.

Ultimately, success will not be measured by the number of projects funded.

Success will be measured by whether a parent can access care for their child sooner, whether an Elder can receive services closer to home, whether communities have the workforce they need, and whether more Alaskans can live healthier lives.

That is the impact we are working toward can accomplish as we come together on this common goal. Thanks to all of you that have participated so far. We look forward to continuing to engage with you during future in-person and online sessions and if you haven't yet, please visit [our RHTP web page](#) for more details.