

Rural Health Transformation Program (RHTP) Advisory Council

Council Meeting Minutes

Date: August 17, 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
Nancy Merriman	Alaska Primary Care Association	Member	Present
Representative Genevieve Mina	Alaska House of Representatives	Member	Present
Mary Wilson	Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority	Member	Present

State of Alaska, Office of the Commissioner Staff

- Lauren Hughes, Senior Program Coordinator, Rural Health Transformation
- Alison Miller, Project Coordinator, Rural Health Transformation
- Julie Sanbei, Publications Specialist
- Leah Van Kirk, Health Care Policy Advisor
- Betsy Wood, Director, Office of Health Savings

Alaska Community Foundation

- Alex McKay, Alaska Community Foundation
- Desiree Jackson, Alaska Community Foundation
- Chellie Skoog, Alaska Community Foundation
- Megan Cacciola, Alaska Community Foundation

Meeting Summary

I. Welcome and Call to Order

A. Roll call

Emily Ricci, Deputy Commissioner, Alaska Department of Health, called the meeting to order, confirmed that a quorum was present, and welcomed Council members. She reiterated the purpose of the Advisory Council as an advisory body to the Commissioner and noted that meetings would continue to follow an informal version of Robert's Rules of Order to support structured and efficient discussion.

B. Approval of Agenda

Deputy Commissioner Ricci presented the meeting agenda and invited comments or proposed revisions. Hearing no objections, the agenda was approved.

C. Approval of Minutes

Deputy Commissioner Ricci presented the minutes from the prior meeting for approval. Hearing no objections or requested revisions, she confirmed that the minutes were approved as presented.

II. Department Updates

RHTP Implementation Awards

Betsy Wood, Director, Office of Health Savings, Alaska Department of Health, provided an update on program progress. She reported that the Department initiated the evaluation and portfolio review process and moved into final budget review and CMS coordination. She noted that the Department has begun issuing rolling Notices of Intent to Award, with updates sent weekly to applicants, and that additional project reviews continue to be finalized throughout August. Ms. Wood highlighted that the team is also preparing its first CMS reporting package, covering progress from December 29 through July 31, and drafting the Year 2 non-compete continuation application. She emphasized that August has been highly active as both federal reporting and award finalization advance concurrently.

Deputy Commissioner Ricci reviewed the year one submission landscape and award progression. She noted the program received 1,800 letters of interest from 864 organizations—representing nearly \$2.7 billion in proposed project ideas. Of these, 403 moved into implementation applications (plus 28 planning projects), and 366 applications were ultimately submitted. Ms. Ricci stated that as of August 14, the Department has issued Notices of Intent to Award for 43 implementation projects and is moving 13

planning projects into award execution. She added that approximately \$35 million in award notices have already been released, with award volume expected to increase significantly over the coming weeks.

Deputy Commissioner Ricci also provided background on the review process, noting that project evaluation, CMS review, and final budget alignment are occurring simultaneously to keep awards on track. She previewed that additional award cycles will grow as reviews conclude and that grant agreement execution is beginning for entities that have already received Notice of Intent to Award.

Alison Miller, Alaska Department of Health, presented an overview of the implementation application components. She explained that applicants must submit detailed workplans, budgets, and administrative documentation such as W-9s and SAM.gov verification, and that these materials are required before award execution. Ms. Miller discussed CMS allowability requirements, noting ongoing challenges related to costs such as internet, construction, and renovation. She explained that some expenses are allowable only with case-by-case federal approval and that guidance continues to evolve through biweekly CMS engagement. The Department is conducting follow-up with applicants to gather clarifying details needed for CMS determinations and is managing these reviews across more than 150 applications requiring additional input.

Jared Kosin, Alaska Hospital and Healthcare Association expressed appreciation for the team's efforts, noting that the iterative back-and-forth with CMS is highly inefficient but not attributable to the Department. He commented that the level of administrative burden being placed on the team should be recognized, given the volume of detailed questions and clarifications required to move projects forward.

Deputy Commissioner Ricci provided additional context regarding Alaska's approach to the Rural Health Transformation Program, noting that the state is administering substantial subrecipient awards rather than limiting awards through a narrower RFP model, as some other states have chosen. This design better aligns with Alaska's needs but creates added administrative complexity for both the Department and CMS. CMS has been exceptionally responsive, despite the high volume of questions and the precedent-setting nature of many of the inquiries.

Monique Martin, Alaska Native Health Consortium, expressed appreciation for the state's chosen subrecipient approach, noting that it supports rural communities and allows local partners to propose ideas tailored to the populations they serve. She raised concerns about the intensity of the federal review process and the administrative burden it

places on applicants, especially smaller organizations. She encouraged continued partnership with CMS and Alaska's congressional delegation to seek avenues for streamlining and reducing complexity in future funding rounds. She also emphasized the importance of ensuring rural applicants are not deterred by the level of scrutiny involved.

Deputy Commissioner Ricci acknowledged these concerns and indicated the Department has already identified adjustments for Year 2 that may help reduce back-and-forth communication. She also reiterated the influential role Alaska's congressional delegation played in establishing the program and emphasized that federal partnership will remain key as the program evolves.

Alison Miller noted that clarification requests have been sent to more than 150 applicants on topics ranging from renovation details needed to determine allowability to inconsistencies between budget narratives and spreadsheets. She reported that applicants have been highly responsive and that CMS has been returning reviews quickly. She stated that projects requiring federal approval continue to be submitted regularly.

Deputy Commissioner Ricci added that projects which have not yet received follow-up should not assume they are ineligible, explaining that the review process is iterative. Some projects may ultimately be funded with adjusted budgets once CMS determines allowability. Any funding not used by one project due to federal restrictions may be redistributed to another.

Representative Mina asked what is meant by "additional information needed."

Alison Miller explained that this typically refers to administrative requirements, such as a current SAM.gov registration, W-9, or UEI, as well as ensuring the Department has all documentation needed to complete an award agreement. Because the Department is working to accelerate the process, these administrative reviews are occurring at the same time as project clarifications.

Deputy Commissioner Ricci noted that concurrent rather than sequential workstreams have been one of the program's most significant challenges, and she expects future years will allow the team to operate more efficiently.

Nancy Merriman, Alaska Primary Care Association, asked if the application could be refined or simplified in future rounds to reduce the intensive workload for applicants and ensure the Department receives the necessary information more easily.

Deputy Commissioner Ricci responded that improvements are already being considered for Round 2 based on lessons learned from both applicants and CMS. She noted opportunities to make expectations clearer from the outset, particularly around budget detail and objectives, but anticipates that the depth of information required will remain largely unchanged due to federal expectations. She added that stronger technical support is a priority moving forward.

Lauren Hughes, Alaska Department of Health added that the team has welcomed applicant feedback and has been documenting opportunities for continuous improvement. She highlighted forthcoming technical assistance efforts, including FAQs, additional webinars, and more targeted support to rural organizations. She invited **Eliza Ramsey** to share reflections.

Eliza Ramsey, Alaska Department of Health described plans for an upcoming webinar focused on key lessons learned and areas where detailed information is critical for federal approval. She noted the importance of providing applicants with clearer examples of strong budget narratives and materials, particularly around travel and renovation costs. She also expressed interest in highlighting funded projects to help smaller communities visualize viable proposals.

Deputy Commissioner Ricci emphasized that Notices of Intent to Award are issued on a rolling basis, meaning weekly award lists may not reflect the overall portfolio balance until all awards are finalized. She assured the Council that projects in smaller rural areas are advancing and that the Department will return to the Advisory Council with portfolio-level analysis once awards are complete.

Lauren Hughes presented updates on regional and community planning meetings. She described the unique and productive discussions occurring in each region and the value of community members connecting directly to share challenges and identify solutions. Draft meeting reports are now being prepared by the contractor and will be shared with participants for review before being finalized. Additional regional meetings are scheduled throughout the year.

Alison Miller added that regional meetings offer insight into local needs and help encourage participation from smaller entities that may otherwise feel intimidated by the complexity of the application process. She highlighted examples of collaboration emerging between local healthcare providers, such as recent coordination in Ketchikan to avoid duplicative proposals.

Representative Mina asked whether regional meeting reports would be made public.

Deputy Commissioner Ricci responded that the Department intends to share the information with communities and will first ensure communities feel comfortable with how their input is represented, given the community-owned nature of the reports.

Deputy Commissioner Ricci noted that the Greater Anchorage regional meeting is scheduled for September 22 and that the Department is considering additional technical assistance activities on September 23. Any such support would also be made available online.

Nancy Merriman later asked about timeline alignment, given awards are being issued later than expected. She requested clarification on how organizations can adjust deliverables and budgets based on revised project start dates.

Betsy Wood explained that while CMS has been flexible in many areas, federal deadlines for obligation and expenditure of funds are firm. The performance period for this round of awards still ends June 30, 2027. Organizations that need to adjust timelines due to later project starts can work through ACF to coordinate with DOH, but flexibility on the final expenditure deadline is not available.

Lauren Hughes added that applicants have been reaching out with specific logistical challenges, including supply-chain limitations. These questions are being forwarded to CMS, which has been responding quickly. She noted that all states—not only Alaska—are facing pace-of-program challenges, and the Department is committed to transparency as it navigates them.

Deputy Commissioner Ricci asked whether there were any remaining questions related to the presentation or department updates, then transitioned the group to unfinished business and Year 2 planning.

III. Unfinished Business

Deputy Commissioner Ricci introduced the Old Business agenda item and noted that Year Two planning is the primary ongoing work.

Monique Martin asked about several Year One milestones included in the state's application—specifically off-grid sanitation and rural facility renovation—areas where no awards have yet appeared. She explained that many rural applicants aligned their

proposals to these milestones due to legislative discussions and Department presentations emphasizing their importance, and she noted confusion among communities who expected clearer progress in these categories.

Deputy Commissioner Ricci responded that both milestones reflect key priorities identified during program development. However, because CMS is still establishing clear guidance for renovation and construction, the Department has had to approach those categories carefully. She explained that CMS has recently permitted minor adjustments to milestone timing, allowing Alaska to meet Year One expectations while continuing to clarify federal allowability for future rounds.

Betsy Wood added that sanitation and renovation proposals often fall into complex federal review areas requiring extensive detail. Given the limited amount of renovation-eligible funding and the evolving guidance from CMS, the Department concentrated Year One awards where allowability was more certain. She emphasized that these areas remain important and the Department intends to revisit them in Year Two once CMS and the state have established clearer shared understanding. She noted that milestone timing—not milestone content—is what CMS allows states to adjust through the non-compete continuation (NCC) application.

Monique Martin appreciated the clarification and stressed the importance of clearly communicating any milestone timing changes to applicants ahead of Year Two. She also observed that many childcare-related proposals did not advance despite earlier public statements highlighting childcare as a workforce priority.

Deputy Commissioner Ricci explained that childcare is a category where the Department intentionally pushed federal boundaries because of its importance to Alaska's workforce. As Year One progressed, CMS's guidance became clearer about what is allowable, and the Department expects that additional information will help applicants strengthen childcare proposals in future rounds. She noted that milestones remain priorities, but timing adjustments are necessary as the state and CMS better understand allowable scopes.

Representative Genevieve Mina asked how the Department intends to identify gaps in applications and whether proactive outreach—possibly involving ACF or research partners—could support greater participation in under-represented categories.

Deputy Commissioner Ricci said the Department is actively exploring several approaches, including targeted, state-directed initiatives to encourage applications in specific priority areas. She noted that this is a topic the Department hopes to discuss further with the Advisory Council.

Lauren Hughes added that the Department and ACF are refining Year Two processes in light of lessons learned from other states and feedback from Alaska communities. She

highlighted the importance of supporting areas that need more attention, as informed by CMS learning sessions and stakeholder experiences.

Eliza Ramsey described ongoing work to develop a “report card” or dashboard summarizing award trends, milestone alignment, and geographic distribution. She noted this is not yet ready because awards are issued weekly and the full picture is still developing. She emphasized that the Department will provide tools to help applicants understand where additional effort is needed in Year Two.

Deputy Commissioner Ricci concluded by noting that an interim Excel file of award information has already been shared publicly and will be supplemented by a more comprehensive dashboard as Year One award decisions are completed.

IV. New Business

Year 2 planning

Deputy Commissioner Ricci opened the new business discussion, noting that planning for Year Two is underway and moving quickly. She explained that the Department’s non-compete continuation (NCC) application will be submitted at the end of the month, with CMS expected to announce Year Two funding by October 31. She emphasized that Year Two and future cycles will follow a more predictable timeline, improving alignment with Alaska’s construction season and enabling better project planning for rural communities.

She shared that the Department is actively developing concepts for structuring the Year Two application process, including maintaining an “open call” for broad innovation while incorporating more targeted structure in certain areas. The Department is evaluating models used in other states and considering whether state-directed initiatives may be helpful.

Lauren Hughes described initial ideas for improving the Year Two application process. She highlighted opportunities to provide greater clarity for applicants in areas where many struggled in Year One—such as equipment purchases, renovation details, and stipends or training costs. She noted the Department is exploring refinements with ACF to make requirements clearer and reduce back-and-forth during review.

Eliza Ramsey added that Year One revealed wide variation in the level of detail applicants provided, particularly in renovation and technology requests. She emphasized that clearer upfront guidance and structured requirements will help applicants produce more complete submissions, support CMS allowability determinations, and strengthen sustainability planning for large technology or equipment investments.

Deputy Commissioner Ricci reinforced the value of funding start-up staffing for new programs, noting that RHTP funds can be an appropriate launch mechanism when long-term reimbursement is available. However, she highlighted the need to transition staff costs to sustainable billing sources as quickly as possible. Year Two applications will likely include prompts or requirements ensuring applicants plan for this transition and do not rely on RHTP funding for extended staffing costs when other pathways exist.

Deputy Commissioner Ricci invited Advisory Council members to share input on what worked well and what should be improved for Round Two.

Nancy Merriman asked whether CMS directed Alaska to base its NCC budget on the original Year One award amount of \$272 million.

Betsy Wood confirmed that states are instructed to begin with the Year One award level, with adjustments handled later if CMS modifies Year Two allocations.

Nancy Merriman raised concerns about reporting performance without Year One project data, since many projects will not yet have measurable outcomes. She asked how the Department will report progress to CMS and make funding decisions for Year Two when first-year performance data may be limited.

Betsy Wood explained that Year One reporting focuses on program build-out, governance, and early initiative actions. Many elements, such as regional planning work and initiation of contracts, can be reported even without full project outcomes. She noted that Alaska has meaningful progress to document and strong policy-action achievements, which other states and CMS have already highlighted. For Year Two projections, the Department will rely on initial project estimates and statewide needs assessments to model future allocations.

Monique Martin raised a broader concern about program sustainability, asking whether the Department has sufficient staffing and structural support to administer RHTP while also managing large-scale Medicaid and HR 1 implementation. She emphasized the importance of supporting the Department's capacity, ensuring transparent processes, and helping policymakers and the public understand how decisions were made. She also asked for clarity on awards made to state agencies and how those applications were reviewed compared to community-based organizations.

Deputy Commissioner Ricci acknowledged the intensity of the workload and emphasized that Year One's pace was not sustainable for staff or applicants. The Department has added personnel, is reassessing staffing needs, and is evaluating whether additional subject-matter expertise should be added through contractors or new hires. She clarified that Alaska Community Foundation assisted with process support, but proposal evaluation and scoring were completed by Department of Health staff with appropriate expertise, including division directors. She also noted that state agency proposals followed

the same LOI and application processes (including the university), and were evaluated using the same criteria, milestones, and needs assessments.

Deputy Commissioner Ricci agreed that a future Advisory Council session focused on capacity, sustainability, and transparency would be valuable.

Representative Genevieve Mina reiterated praise for the Department's transparency, noting that many states offer little visibility into their RHTP activities. She asked two questions:

1. How performance metrics factor into scoring; and
2. Whether Alaska is considering building out a dedicated data analytics capacity similar to Iowa or Wyoming, where states use health economists and statewide data mapping to guide strategic RHTP investment.

Betsy Wood explained that performance metrics do not influence scoring; instead, CMS evaluates progress toward milestones, program build-up, and state policy actions. Metrics in the application serve as programmatic indicators but are not tied to future funding awards.

Eliza Ramsey provided background on existing Department data capacity and expressed enthusiasm for building a more robust analytics function aligned with RHTP. She noted opportunities to integrate public health, Medicaid, and community-generated data, and to explore more timely, geographically focused metrics to support strategic decision-making. She also shared that early work is underway on a provider gap analysis that uses mapping techniques to identify shortages statewide.

Deputy Commissioner Ricci highlighted the importance of expanding meaningful metrics beyond those listed in the CMS application and building a dashboard that reflects Alaska's long-term priorities. She acknowledged this is an area that could not be fully developed in Year One but will be a priority moving forward.

Mary Wilson, Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority, encouraged the Department to consider blending local "bubbling-up" innovation with strategic statewide priorities. She proposed that Year Two could retain open access for community-driven ideas while dedicating portions of funding to specific, analytically identified statewide needs. She stated this approach could respect Alaska's commitment to transparency and local initiative while improving efficiency, pace, and impact.

Deputy Commissioner Ricci agreed this concept aligns with internal discussions. She emphasized the importance of balancing open calls with strategic direction and noted how emerging regional coordination has been a powerful indicator of readiness and community alignment. She highlighted that Alaska's independent healthcare environment can make

collaboration challenging, but RHTP is helping demonstrate the value of regional coordination that improves efficiency, sustainability, and patient care.

Betsy Wood addressed a question submitted in the chat regarding when the Department will know Year Two funding availability. She explained that the Department is currently assessing anticipated Year Two needs based on early project estimates and the number of Year One projects requesting multi-year support. She emphasized that Year Two funding must allow space for returning projects and new entrants alike, and the Department is actively balancing both.

V. Closing Items

Next steps and action items

Deputy Commissioner Ricci noted that the Department will reach out within the next four weeks to schedule the next Advisory Council meeting. She reiterated that updated award information will continue to be released each Friday as Notices of Intent to Award move forward and encouraged Council members to reach out with questions at any time.

Adjournment

Hearing no objections, the meeting was adjourned two minutes early.

Council members offered closing thanks.