



Day 1: Rural Health Transformation Program (RHTP) in Alaska Webinar Recap

Webinar Overview

The Alaska Department of Health convened a statewide kickoff webinar to formally launch implementation of the Rural Health Transformation Program (RHTP) and to share early direction on how the program will be structured, governed, and rolled out over the coming years. Part of the ongoing engagement process, health care providers, Tribal health organizations, community-based organizations, local governments, and other partners across Alaska came together to learn about next steps.

Department leadership emphasized that this webinar was intended as a high-level introduction and that additional details, guidance, and opportunities for engagement will be provided through future webinars, written guidance, and in-person convenings. Participants were encouraged to view the RHTP as a long-term, system-level investment rather than a one-time grant opportunity.

Background and Context

The program was established through federal legislation to support states in making strategic, sustainable investments that improve access to care, strengthen health system performance, and address long-standing challenges in rural and remote communities. Alaska's application was shaped by extensive outreach, including a statewide Request for Information (RFI) that generated hundreds of ideas and recommendations from across the health services ecosystem.

Speakers underscored that Alaska's application to the federal government was intentionally grounded in Alaska voices and realities, reflecting the hub-and-spoke nature of the state's health system, the importance of Tribal partnerships, and the need for flexibility across diverse regions.

Program Vision and Goals

The Department outlined a vision for the RHTP that focuses on transforming how care is delivered and supported across Alaska. Rather than funding isolated programs, the RHTP is intended to:

- Improve access to affordable, high-quality care close to home

- Strengthen primary, preventive, behavioral health, specialty, emergency, and long-term care services
- Reduce administrative and operational barriers that limit provider capacity
- Support and stabilize the health care workforce
- Encourage innovation, coordination, and value-based approaches to care

The program is organized around three overarching goal areas:

1. **Promote lifelong health and wellbeing** for Alaskans
2. **Build sustainable, outcome-driven health systems** that align financing with community needs and measurable results
3. **Drive workforce and technology innovation** to better support care teams and patients

Funding Scope and Eligible Applicants

Department leadership emphasized that RHTP funding is intended to support system-wide transformation. Any eligible entity across Alaska that contributes to health or health-related services may apply, regardless of geographic location, so long as the proposed project advances project goals and meets eligibility requirements determined by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS).

Potential applicants include, but are not limited to:

- Tribal health organizations and Tribal entities
- Hospitals, clinics, and other health care providers
- Community-based and social service organizations
- Local governments and regional entities
- Workforce training and education partners
- State agencies and collaborating partners

Partnerships, both existing and new, were strongly encouraged, particularly where collaboration can improve coordination, efficiency, or regional impact.

Funding Pathways and Project Readiness

The Department described multiple funding pathways to accommodate organizations at different stages of readiness. These pathways are intended to support:

- Administrative and operational readiness
- Planning and project design
- Implementation of fully developed projects
- Targeted innovation projects aligned with high-impact needs identified by the Department

Applicants will be asked to demonstrate how their proposed work aligns with RHTP goals, addresses a documented need, and can be sustained beyond the RHTP funding period.

Evaluation, Monitoring, and Sustainability

Speakers highlighted that RHTP funding is time-limited and must be used strategically. Projects will be expected to include clear metrics, reporting plans, and sustainability strategies. The Department of Health will monitor progress, collect performance data, and report outcomes to federal partners, while also working collaboratively with funded entities to address challenges and support success.

A recurring theme throughout the webinar was the importance of investing in efforts that will endure beyond the life of the fund, rather than creating programs that sunset when federal funding ends.

Ongoing Engagement and Next Steps

The kickoff webinar is the first of many planned engagement opportunities. Future activities will include:

- Additional virtual webinars to provide program updates and answer questions
- Community-led regional planning workshops beginning in spring and summer
- Anticipated annual in-person convenings

Participants were encouraged to stay engaged, share ideas, and sign up for updates through the Department of Health website.

Questions & Answers

How does the Department define “rural,” “remote,” and “frontier” for this program?

The RHTP is designed to support rural health transformation broadly across Alaska. Rather than relying on a narrow definition, the Department is focused on how projects improve access, coordination, and outcomes within Alaska’s interconnected health system. Because Alaska’s system operates on a hub-and-spoke model, investments in one part of the system can have statewide benefits and are available to every community and region within the state.

Who can apply for RHTP dollars?

Any eligible entity across Alaska that supports health or health-related services may apply. This includes Tribal health organizations, hospitals, clinics, community-based organizations, local governments, workforce and education partners, and state agencies. Projects must advance rural health transformation goals and meet eligibility requirements determined by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS).

Is the funding limited to specific types of projects or populations?

The Department has not pre-allocated funding percentages to specific project types. Instead, applications will be evaluated based on alignment with program goals, demonstrated need, readiness, and potential impact. This approach allows flexibility and responsiveness to emerging priorities.

What kinds of activities are not allowable under RHTP funding?

Federal rules prohibit certain uses of funds, including construction of new facilities, purchasing land or buildings, supplanting existing funding sources, and paying for services already reimbursed through insurance. Additional details on allowable and unallowable costs will be provided in application guidance from CMS.

When will applications open, and what does the timeline look like?

The Department anticipates opening an initial registration and letter of intent process before full applications are released. Funding awards are expected to begin in spring 2026, with additional opportunities in subsequent funding years.

How quickly must funds be spent once awarded?

Funds must be obligated within one year of award, with an additional year to fully expend them. Unspent funds may be redistributed by the federal government, which is why readiness and timely implementation are critical.

How will projects be evaluated and selected?

Applications will be reviewed based on criteria that include alignment with Alaska's RHTP goals, community or regional need, feasibility, strength of partnerships, potential for measurable impact, cost effectiveness, and sustainability beyond RHTP funding.

What reporting and data collection will be required of funded projects?

Funded entities will be expected to collect and submit regular performance and financial reports. The Department will use this information to meet federal reporting requirements, track statewide progress, and share transparent updates with stakeholders.

Will technical assistance be available to help organizations apply or implement projects?

Yes. The Department emphasized its role as a partner and plans to provide technical assistance, guidance, and resources to help applicants develop strong proposals and to support funded entities throughout implementation.

How can organizations stay informed and continue to engage?

The Department will post webinar recordings, updates, and application information on its website. Organizations are encouraged to sign up for program updates and to participate in future webinars, planning workshops, and convenings.

Media Highlights: Selected Quotes

The following quotes are pulled directly from webinar remarks and lightly edited for clarity. They are provided for media use and accurately reflect the speakers' intent and statements.

Commissioner Heidi Hedberg, Alaska Department of Health

- “The Rural Health Transformation Program truly is one of those generational opportunities we have to improve access and health outcomes across the state. This application was built by the people it is meant to serve.”

Deputy Commissioner Emily Ricci, Alaska Department of Health

- “This is just the kickoff. There is a lot more information coming, and this program is really about bringing regions and communities together to identify gaps, align efforts, and shape what Alaska’s health care system looks like for generations to come.”

Betsy Wood, Associate Director, Office of Health Savings, Alaska Department of Health

- “This is a short window of time for a significant investment, which means we need to focus on projects that can stand on their own after this funding ends, not programs that disappear in 2031.”

Dr. Anne Zink, Emergency Medicine Physician and Public Health Leader

- “This is really about making sure information gets out to Alaskans and that people understand how this opportunity can support real transformation across the health system.”

Monique Martin, Vice President of Intergovernmental Affairs, Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium

- “If we strengthen coordination and support across the system, from hospitals to clinics to families, we can change outcomes for patients and communities in meaningful ways.”