

Rural Health Transformation Program (RHTP) Advisory Council

Council Meeting Minutes

Date: April 22, 2026

Location: Virtual

Meeting Attendance

Name	Organization	Title	Attendance
<i>RHTP Advisory Council Members</i>			
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 State House	Member	Present
Mary Wilson	Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority	Member	Present
<i>State of Alaska, Office of the Commissioner Staff</i>			
Tricia Franklin	Project Coordinator, Rural Health Transformation		
Alison Miller	Project Coordinator, Rural Health Transformation		
Julie Sanbei	Publications Specialist		
Leah Van Kirk	Health Care Policy Advisor		
Eva Venema	Project Coordinator, Health Care Savings		
Betsy Wood	Director, Health Care Savings		
<i>Alaska Community Foundation</i>			
Desiree Jackson	Alaska Community Foundation		
Alex McKay	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.

Nancy Merriman, Alaska Primary Care Association, recommended that future agendas more clearly identify specific questions or decision points where the Department is seeking Advisory Council input. She noted that clearer framing would allow members to better prepare for discussion and provide more targeted feedback.

Deputy Commissioner Ricci acknowledged the recommendation and agreed that future agendas will aim to more clearly highlight areas where Council input is requested. She noted that some meetings may remain primarily informational, while others will include more structured requests for feedback.

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

A. Letters of Interest (LOI) Process Update

Betsy Wood, Director, Health Care Savings, Alaska Department of Health, provided an update on the Letters of Interest (LOI) process. She reported that the Department received nearly 1,800 submissions from approximately 864 unique organizations across the state. She explained that the Alaska Community Foundation (ACF), serving as the Department's grant administration partner, conducted the initial intake, eligibility screening, and preliminary review of submissions. She stated that the Department is currently conducting a detailed manual review of LOIs and anticipates completing this work by the end of April. She noted that once review is complete, the Department will provide outcomes to ACF, which will then communicate directly with applicants regarding the status of their submissions and next steps. She explained that applicants advancing to implementation will be invited to submit full applications, with an anticipated application window of approximately three weeks in mid-May. Ms. Wood acknowledged the significant effort

required from applicants and expressed appreciation for their participation within a compressed timeframe.

Deputy Commissioner Ricci provided additional context on program implementation, noting that Alaska's approach of directly distributing funding across a broad set of organizations differs from models used in other states that rely on centralized entities. She stated that, despite internal concerns regarding timing, Alaska remains ahead of many states in implementation progress and continues to move forward at a rapid pace. She emphasized the importance of maintaining momentum and noted that recent staffing increases will support continued progress.

Nils Andreassen, Alaska Municipal League, emphasized that the primary priority should remain the efficient and timely distribution of funds. While expressing appreciation for stakeholder engagement activities such as regional meetings, he cautioned that these efforts should not detract from the core objective of getting funding to communities. He also raised questions regarding the proportion of funding allocated to coordination and administrative activities and encouraged the Department to prioritize investments that result in meaningful transformation rather than reinforcing existing systems without significant change.

B. Website Update

Deputy Commissioner Ricci introduced updates related to the RHTP website and communications strategy.

Betsy Wood stated that the Department is working to ensure that meeting materials and program updates are consistently posted online to provide a centralized and accessible source of information for stakeholders.

Nancy Merriman commended the Department for recent improvements to website navigation and usability. She noted that stakeholders are particularly interested in understanding the status of the LOI process and emphasized the importance of providing regular updates, even if those updates are brief.

Betsy Wood acknowledged the challenge of balancing timely communication with the need to provide complete and accurate information. She noted that the Department has received consistent feedback requesting more frequent updates and is working to increase communication cadence, particularly as additional staff resources become available.

Monique Martin, Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, reinforced the importance of regular communication, noting that the pace of the program has created uncertainty among stakeholders. She emphasized that even short updates can significantly improve transparency and stakeholder confidence.

Betsy Wood agreed and reiterated the Department's commitment to improving communication frequency and clarity moving forward.

C. Regional Planning

Betsy Wood introduced the concept of regional planning meetings, explaining that these convenings are intended to bring together stakeholders within geographic regions to identify gaps in care, align priorities, and support coordinated planning efforts. She noted that these meetings will inform funding decisions over time and support alignment across organizations.

Monique Martin emphasized the importance of ensuring inclusive participation in regional meetings, noting that outreach efforts may not reach all communities. She recommended providing multiple pathways for participation and clearly communicating how stakeholders can engage. She also highlighted the importance of data in informing decision-making and raised concerns regarding gaps in available data sources, particularly for rural and off-road system communities. She emphasized the need to incorporate data from multiple systems, including tribal health systems, and to consider measures that capture unmet need, such as services not accessed or delayed care.

Deputy Commissioner Ricci agreed that community input will be essential in validating and supplementing available data. She noted that initial regional meetings in Seward and Kenai were scheduled based on local readiness and will serve as an opportunity to test and refine the regional planning approach.

III. Unfinished Business

Deputy Commissioner Ricci reintroduced ongoing topics from prior meetings, including the pacing of program implementation, refinement of the LOI process, and the balance between rapid deployment of funds and thoughtful program design. She emphasized that these areas remain active points of discussion as the Department continues to incorporate feedback and adjust its approach.

Monique Martin reiterated concerns regarding the compressed timeline associated with the LOI and implementation process. She emphasized that smaller and rural organizations may face challenges advancing projects within the current timeframes due to staffing constraints, procurement timelines, and seasonal limitations that affect travel and construction. She stressed the importance of revisiting these timelines after the first year of implementation and identifying opportunities to improve alignment with on-the-ground realities. She further noted that many organizations may need to begin planning or initiating work prior to receiving confirmation of funding, which introduces risk and uncertainty. She encouraged the Department to consider how future cycles could better support organizational readiness and reduce these pressures.

Betsy Wood acknowledged these concerns and reiterated that the first year of implementation represents an off-cycle with accelerated timelines driven by federal requirements. She stated that the Department anticipates future funding cycles will allow for more predictable and manageable timelines and will better align with Alaska's seasonal and operational constraints. She also emphasized that the program is designed as a multi-year effort and that organizations will have additional opportunities to participate in future rounds if they are not ready to proceed under the current timeline. She encouraged organizations to assess their readiness and consider deferring participation if necessary.

Nils Andreassen, Alaska Municipal League, revisited earlier comments regarding the importance of maintaining focus on timely fund distribution. He emphasized that while process refinement and stakeholder engagement are important, the Department should prioritize moving resources into communities as efficiently as possible. Mr. Andreassen cautioned that delays in funding could limit the program's ability to achieve meaningful impact within the available timeframe.

Emily Ricci acknowledged this perspective and reiterated the Department's commitment to balancing urgency with thoughtful implementation. She noted that the Department is actively working to streamline processes while ensuring that funding decisions are aligned with program goals and informed by stakeholder input.

Monique Martin also reiterated the importance of capturing and preserving high-quality project ideas that may not advance in the current funding round. She noted that these proposals represent significant community effort and could be leveraged in future funding opportunities or supported through alternative funding sources. She encouraged the Department to consider mechanisms for sharing or repurposing these ideas to maximize their value.

Emily Ricci agreed that preserving and learning from submitted proposals is important and noted that the Department intends to develop summaries and analyses of LOI submissions to inform future planning and decision-making.

IV. New Business

A. Timeline

Betsy Wood provided a high-level overview of the LOI review and funding process, noting that demand significantly exceeds available funding. She explained that proposals are being reviewed and categorized into pathways such as readiness, planning, and implementation.

Monique Martin expressed concern regarding the compressed timeline and its impact on applicants, particularly smaller and rural organizations. She noted that organizations may face challenges implementing projects within tight timelines due to logistical and seasonal constraints and emphasized the importance of evaluating and refining timelines in future cycles.

Betsy Wood responded that applicants may need to assess their readiness to proceed within current timelines and consider participating in future funding cycles if necessary. She noted that the program is multi-year and will provide additional opportunities for participation.

Deputy Commissioner Ricci added that the first year represents an off-cycle with compressed timelines and that future cycles are expected to better align with Alaska's planning and construction timelines.

B. Process Overview

Alex McKay, Alaska Community Foundation, described the LOI review process, noting that proposals were evaluated by subject matter experts and, in many cases, reviewed by multiple individuals to ensure a comprehensive assessment. She explained that reviewers considered both the strength of individual proposals and overall portfolio balance, including geographic distribution and populations served.

Desiree Jackson, Alaska Community Foundation, provided additional detail on evaluation criteria, explaining that proposals were assessed based on eligibility, alignment with RHTP priorities, feasibility, and organizational readiness. She noted that proposals ranged from highly developed projects ready for implementation to concepts requiring

additional planning. She emphasized that the primary challenge was the limited funding available relative to the number of high-quality submissions.

Monique Martin recommended that the Department share information on high-quality proposals that were not funded, noting that these ideas could potentially be supported through alternative funding sources or partnerships. She emphasized the importance of preserving community-driven ideas. She also suggested convening applicants to gather feedback on the LOI process, particularly from smaller and rural organizations, to inform future improvements.

Alex McKay agreed and noted that the review team is documenting lessons learned and plans to consolidate feedback to improve future funding rounds.

Deputy Commissioner Ricci outlined key roles for the Advisory Council moving forward, including providing input on process improvements, refining evaluation frameworks, and identifying gaps and opportunities across proposals. She noted that the Department intends to share high-level summaries of LOIs publicly to improve transparency. She also highlighted opportunities for coordination across similar proposals to improve efficiency and maximize impact.

Betsy Wood discussed the Department's approach to program evaluation, noting that data collection will support both federal reporting requirements and broader efforts to measure program impact. She emphasized the importance of developing a comprehensive approach to tracking outcomes and demonstrating the program's impact across communities. She noted that the Department is considering engaging external support to assist in developing and implementing a robust evaluation strategy.

V. Closing Items

A. Next steps and action items

Deputy Commissioner Ricci summarized the discussion, emphasizing that the program is progressing rapidly and that the Department remains committed to continuous improvement based on Advisory Council and stakeholder feedback. She reiterated the importance of balancing speed, transparency, and thoughtful implementation and noted that lessons learned from the first funding cycle will inform future rounds.