

Alaska Health Systems Collaboration Unit



Connecting Alaskans to
new and improved services for better health



FY2024 Annual Report

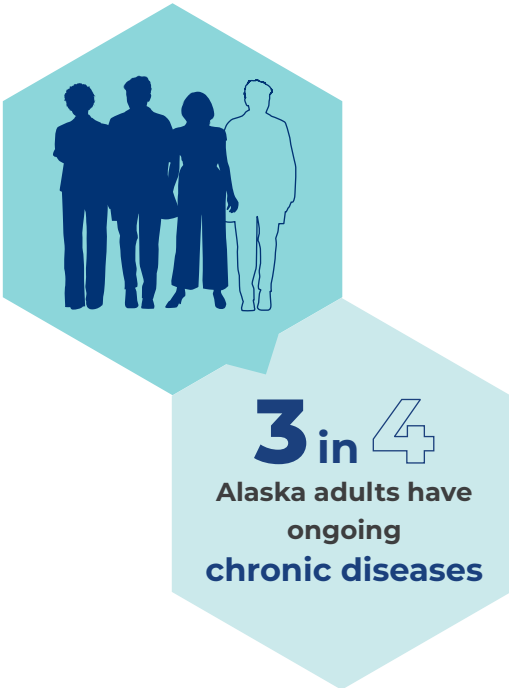


Overview

In Alaska, 3 out of 4 adults (75%) live with a chronic disease or related behavior or condition that increases their chances of developing a chronic disease, like smoking or having high cholesterol.¹ These ongoing chronic diseases include heart, lung, and kidney disease; stroke; cancer; diabetes; asthma; arthritis; and obesity. Two of these diseases — cancer and heart disease — are the leading, often preventable causes of death in Alaska.²

Symptoms of chronic diseases can last for years and often do not go away completely. They significantly reduce quality of life and financial stability for people experiencing them. Chronic diseases also strain the health care system by imposing a significant, long-term cost for continued care and management of symptoms. Total spending on Medicaid services in Alaska was \$2.12 billion in 2020.³ Nearly 80% of that amount covered services for individuals with a chronic disease. **For each Alaskan living with one or more chronic diseases, the average annual Medicaid cost reaches \$32,643. For each Alaskan without a chronic disease, the average annual Medicaid cost is 10 times less: \$3,146.³**

Alaska’s Health Systems Collaboration Unit (HSC) runs four programs to improve the prevention and management of chronic diseases that affect most adults in every region of Alaska. This annual report describes each program and related success stories.



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HSC is within the [Alaska Department of Health, Division of Public Health, Section of Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion](#) (CDPHP). The HSC unit has three main goals to improve the health of Alaskans:



This Fiscal Year 24 (FY24) Annual Report provides updates about how the HSC unit met those goals related to preventing and better managing heart disease and stroke, diabetes, and cancer. It also shares the dementia program’s recommended priorities, barriers toward progress, and accomplishments. These accomplishments include expanding the statewide [Fresh Start campaign](#) to educate Alaskans about ways to reduce chances of dementia and connect them to existing programs that improve the health of the body and the brain. Programs promoted through Fresh Start provide affordable, often free, and flexible ways to prevent or manage chronic diseases like diabetes and heart disease. The report begins with several success stories of how HSC staff worked together to address multiple chronic diseases and collaborate with health care providers and partners to improve the health of Alaskans. For more background, please read the section’s [2018-2022 Strategic Plan](#).⁴

Success stories

Projects that connect Health System Collaboration programs

Behavior-change campaigns

In late December 2022, the Health Systems Collaboration Unit (HSC) worked with public health leaders across Alaska's Section of Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (CDPHP) to launch the [Fresh Start campaign](#). The campaign connects Alaskan adults with programs to help them improve their health by making changes. The programs come at no cost to participants. This campaign has been instrumental in enrolling about 3,500 Alaskans into programs to help them achieve or maintain a healthy weight, manage diabetes, or lower blood pressure.⁵

With a broad reach and high engagement, the [Fresh Start campaign](#) is an access point for both online and in-person and online health improvement programs. This helps Alaskans access programs that work for them, in their community or online. In summer 2024, Fresh Start also expanded to include new educational messages focused on actions adults can take and programs they can join to protect brain health and reduce chances of developing dementia.

Be active every day to reduce your chances for dementia.



Improving connections among providers, patients and organizations to better meet Alaskans' health and social needs

Our life experiences impact our health in many ways. These experiences can affect our ability to access health care and preventive services, and to take steps to be healthier, and live long and full lives. The place where an individual lives and works and their access to food and services often have more impact on a person's health than services provided by a doctor or hospital.⁵ People are more likely to eat healthy and nutritious foods if they are available and affordable in their communities. They're more likely to visit the doctor if they have a way a get there. They can take better care of their health and well-being if they have a safe place to live.

During the 2024 fiscal year, the HSC team engaged in two pilot projects that use health information technology solutions. The projects linked community organizations with health care providers to coordinate care, making sure people could access the resources they need for better health. These links to supportive resources in communities can help reduce the burden on medical service providers.



The first project used electronic medical records (EMRs) to connect patients seen at a community health clinic with social services and Alaska's Tobacco Quit Line. The program was optional and all patients included in the pilot voluntarily opted in. As a result of the pilot, hundreds of Alaskans accessed a range of services and support to increase their safety and improve their health, including behavioral health services, housing, food, transportation and interpersonal violence advocacy. This voluntary information exchange also gave healthcare providers more complete picture of their patients' social and health needs to increase quality of care.

Building off these proven projects, the HSC team is moving forward to create a regional pilot project. This project will link multiple doctors' offices and hospitals with community-based organizations. This connection of health care providers and organizations across a region allows all of them to work together to create automated electronic referrals (eReferrals) that meet a patient's social needs. This project is aimed at creating a coordinated approach for whole person health. This approach ensures a person's social and health needs are coordinated through health information technology.

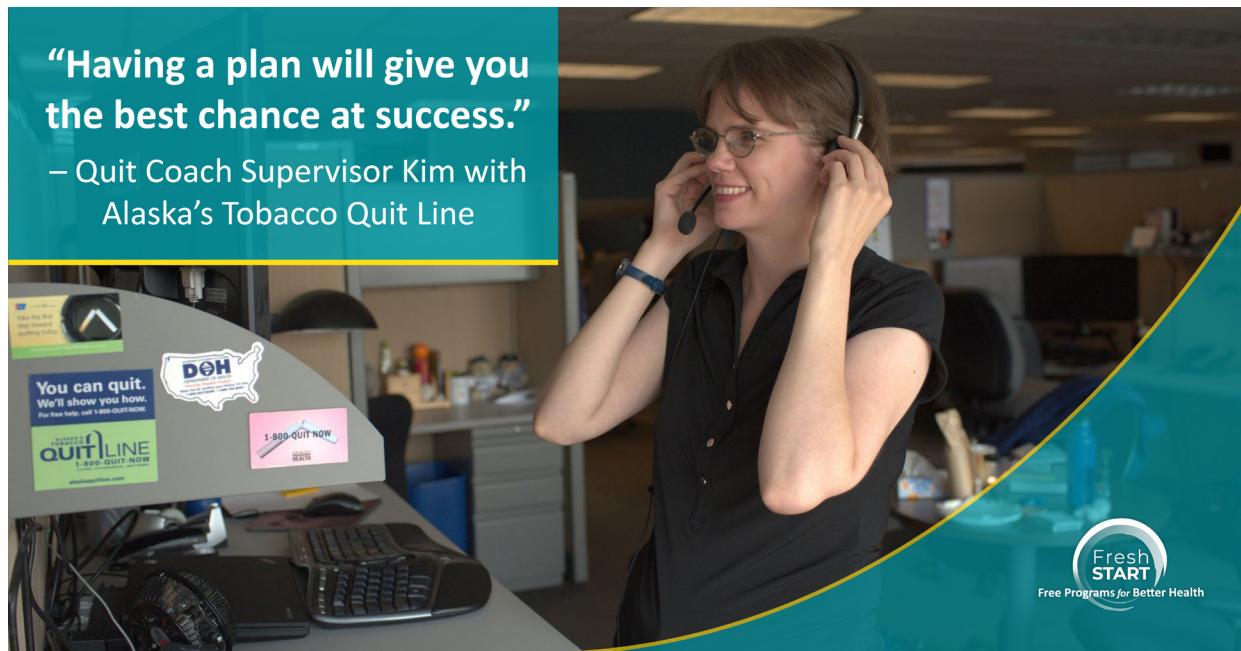
Success stories (continued)

Health systems change to prevent and reduce tobacco use

Many chronic diseases have the same risk factors and protective factors. A risk factor increases the chances for a chronic disease. A protective factor decreases the chances for a chronic disease. For example, preventing obesity is shown to be a shared protective factor for multiple chronic diseases. That's because preventing obesity can also reduce chances of developing diabetes, heart disease, dementia, and many types of cancer. Managing blood sugars and diabetes are shared protective factors, helping to reduce the chances of developing dementia and heart disease. Quitting or never using tobacco is a shared protective factor for many chronic diseases, including heart disease and cancer.



HSC works with other programs and partners to strengthen protective factors that reduce chances of chronic diseases. One example is HSC's work with health care partners to improve how they screen for and make referrals to manage chronic diseases and tobacco use. This work is in partnership with the Tobacco Prevention and Control Program's grantees that represent multiple health care providers across the state. HSC supports a community of learning for these grantees to empower them to implement policy and practice changes in their regions. These changes can ensure that every patient is screened at every visit for tobacco and nicotine use, and then are referred to evidence-based programs to quit as needed.



Dementia Education and Prevention Program

About the Program

Alaska's population of adults 65 and older is expected to increase by 18% by 2050.⁷ An estimated 9% of Alaska seniors have Alzheimer's disease and related types of dementia.⁸ By 2060, the projected number of people with Alzheimer's disease is expected to nearly double.⁹

The 32nd Alaska Legislature (2021–2022) [passed a bill](#) to create the Dementia Education and Prevention program within the Alaska Department of Health.^{10,11} This program aligns the department with the existing work of the Alaska Dementia Action Collaborative. It focuses on health changes people can make to reduce their chances of developing dementia. The program will also improve early diagnosis, treatment and resources for providers and caregivers.

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DEMENTIA

Accomplishments

During State Fiscal Year 2024, the Dementia Education and Prevention program staff worked with other DOH public health leaders to expand Alaska's [Fresh Start campaign](#) to share new messages and resources about ways to reduce chances of Alzheimer's and dementia. These messages highlight actions adults can take to [protect brain health as they age](#). Messages and resources shared [12 proven habits](#) that can improve the health of the body and the brain and reduce dementia risk.

The Dementia Education and Prevention program is also supported by funding through the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) BOLD grant to address Alzheimer's disease and related types of dementia. BOLD is an acronym referring to the federal Building Our Largest Dementia infrastructure for Alzheimer's Act, Public Law 115-406.¹²

Alaska's dementia program staff utilizes BOLD federal grant funding in the following efforts:

- **Increasing awareness and understanding of dementia among the general public, health care providers, and other professionals**
- **Addressing topics that relate to dementia prevention**
- **Addressing social needs and nonmedical factors that influence health**
- **Creating and sharing new resources and messages focused on reducing risk of dementia through Alaska's expanded Fresh Start campaign**

Barriers

Up to 45% of dementias may be avoided by making healthy lifestyle changes.¹³ Education is needed to teach these healthy behaviors early in life, rather than changing behaviors once habits are established. Additionally, early detection of cognitive decline through screening can help individuals plan for their future, find support earlier, and potentially benefit from new medications that are only approved for the early stages of dementia.

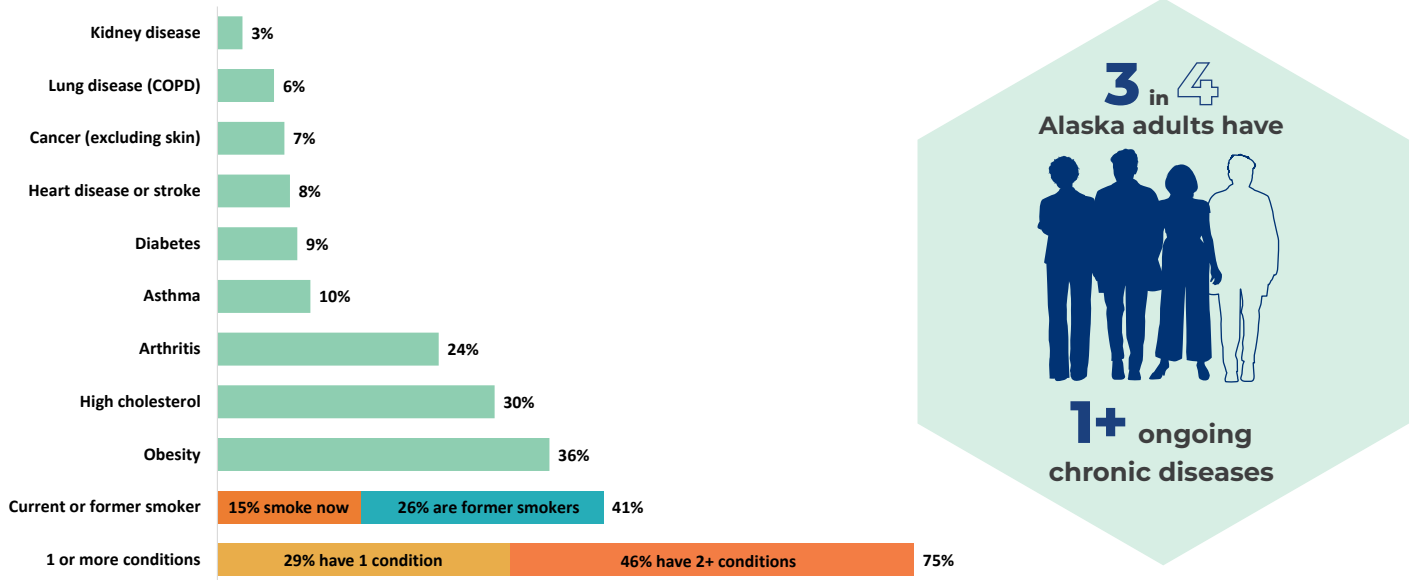
Recommendations for priorities in Alaska

Strategies in the new BOLD grant workplan are the short-term priority recommendations for Alaska:

- 1 Deliver early risk reduction programs at elementary and secondary school and university levels**
- 2 Run a statewide campaign to educate all Alaskans about risk reduction strategies and connect adults to programs that can improve the health of the body and the brain**
- 3 Educate the public on the importance of cognitive screening and early detection**
- 4 Establish an Alaska-specific provider toolkit and train medical providers on diagnosing and treating Alzheimer's disease and related dementias**
- 5 Increase availability of housing and direct services to Alaskans experiencing Alzheimer's disease and related dementias, and improve support for caregivers**

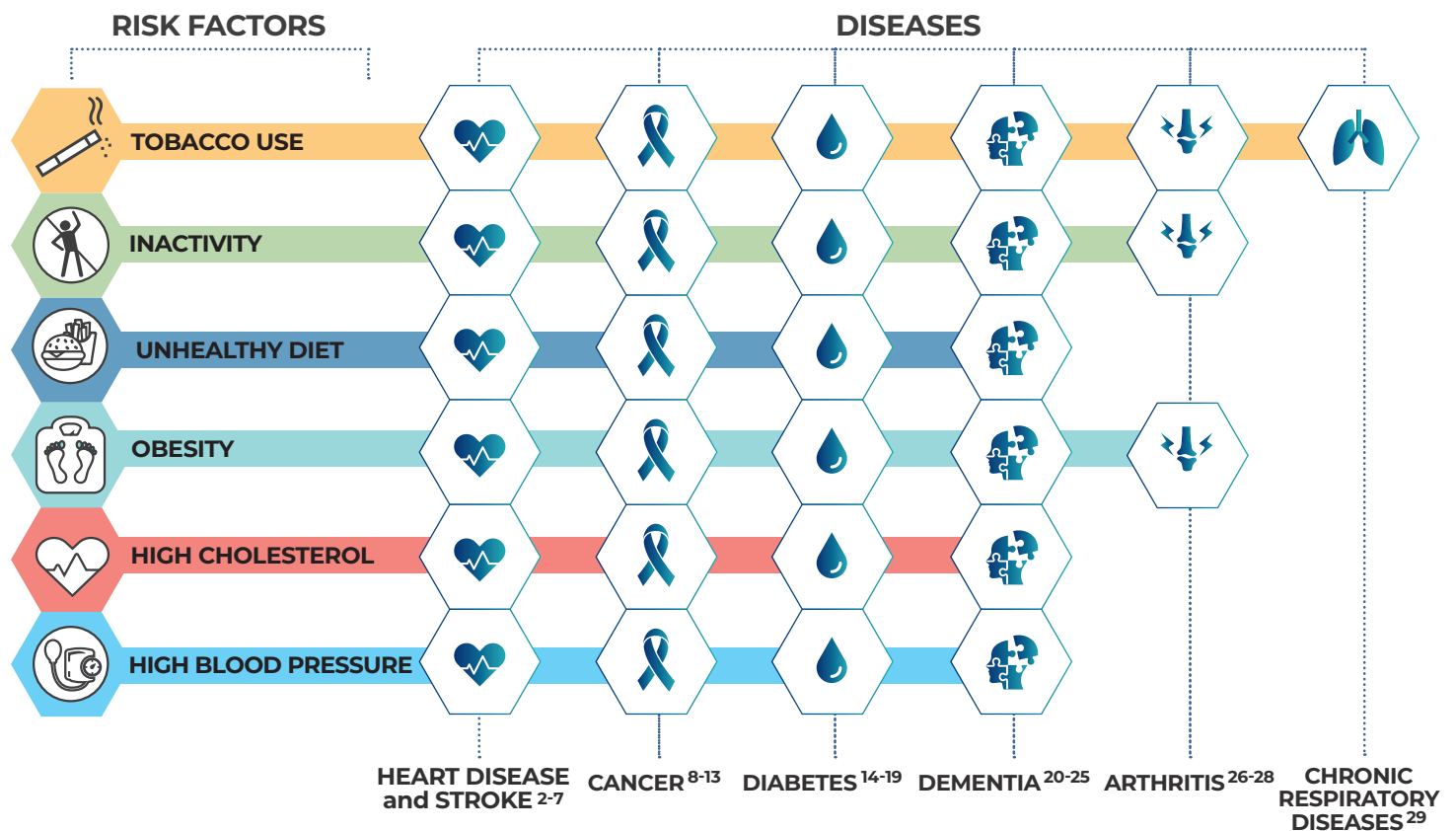
THE PROBLEM: Most Alaskans live with a chronic disease

Three out of four Alaska adults have at least one ongoing chronic disease, condition or related behavior like smoking. Many of these health concerns are connected, with 46% of Alaska adults having two or more of these concerns at the same time.¹



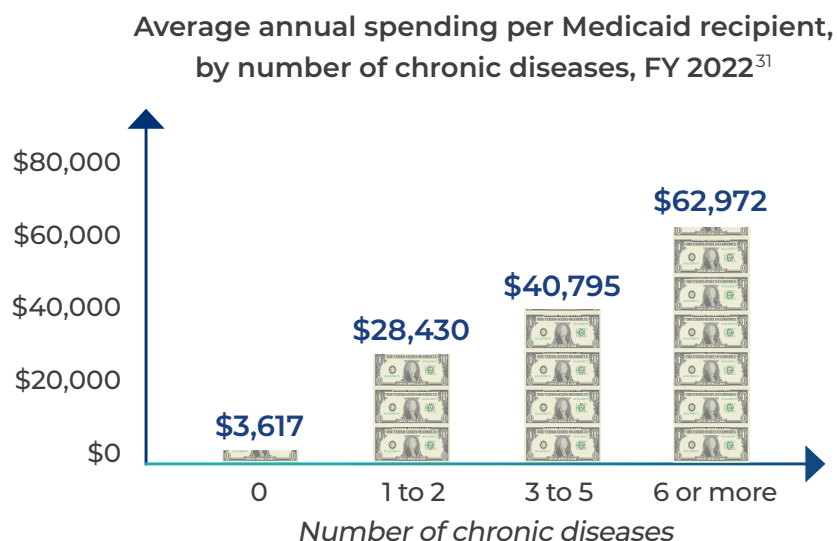
Tobacco use, inactivity, unhealthy diet and other **preventable risk factors** can cause more than one ongoing chronic disease.

SIX RISK FACTORS ARE LINKED TO ONE OR MORE CHRONIC DISEASE:



THE COST: To Alaska

An adult living with one or more chronic diseases is much more likely to visit the emergency room, need hospital care, and pay significantly higher health care costs than an adult without chronic diseases.³⁰ **The more chronic diseases that an Alaska adult has, the higher that adult's health care costs will be each year.**



THE SOLUTION: Key changes to prevent and manage chronic diseases

Four healthy behaviors—never smoking, being physically active, following a healthy diet, and maintaining a healthy weight—are linked to as much as an 80% reduction in the chances of developing the most common and deadly chronic diseases.³²

Make the following healthy changes to help prevent or to improve ongoing chronic diseases:

1

Quit smoking or don't start

2

Be active every day

3

Eat fruits and vegetables and limit sugary drinks

4

Maintain a healthy weight

WHAT CAN WE DO? Communities working together to improve health

Public health professionals: **Promote** positive changes that help people stay healthy.

Work with communities to improve the places where people live, work, and play to empower Alaskans to be as healthy as possible.

Health care providers: **Screen** for chronic diseases and educate Alaskans about risk factors.

Improve overall health by coordinating care with other providers and community organizations.

Promote positive health changes, such as quitting smoking, being active, and more.

Refer patients to chronic disease prevention and management programs in their community or online at freshstart.alaska.gov. These programs often provide coaching and medication as needed to meet health goals.

Individuals: **Prioritize** the four healthy behaviors discussed above.

Visit freshstart.alaska.gov to find a program to help.

Diabetes Prevention and Control Program

About the Program

People develop diabetes when their bodies either do not produce enough insulin or do not use it effectively. This leads to high blood sugar levels. Over time, high blood sugar levels can cause serious health issues, including heart disease, chronic kidney disease, nerve damage, amputations, and loss of hearing or vision. In Alaska, 8% of adults live with diabetes.¹ About 12% have prediabetes, which means blood sugar levels are elevated but not high enough to be diagnosed as diabetes.¹ In 2023, diabetes was the ninth leading cause of death in Alaska, causing almost 150 deaths.²

Alaska's [Diabetes Prevention and Control Program](#) focuses on preventing and managing diabetes through a statewide network of services and partnerships.

DIABETES
prevention
program
ENROLLEES LOST
AN AVERAGE OF
8 LBS

Empower Alaskans for individual wellness

Alaska's Diabetes Prevention and Control Program provides capacity-building support to National Diabetes Prevention Programs (DPPs) and Diabetes Self-Management Education and Support (DSMES) programs statewide. DPP is a year-long, structured curriculum designed to help individuals lower their risk of developing type 2 diabetes by adopting healthier lifestyles. DSMES programs empower people living with diabetes to manage their condition and improve quality of life. Participation in DPP and DSMES programs improves medication usage and helps delay or prevent diabetes complications.^{14, 15} These programs provide significant cost savings for Alaskans and health insurers.¹⁶ Medicaid reimbursement for DPP, if authorized, would amplify this savings by sustaining pilot programs and removing financial barriers for those who could benefit the most.

Alaska's Diabetes Prevention and Control Program has provided free online DPP and DSMES programs for all Alaska adults for several years. In-person programs are less widely available, and the Diabetes Prevention and Control Program has been working to identify and support new sites to increase this option.

There are currently seven Diabetes Prevention Program sites delivering in-person services to nearly 400 Alaskans.⁵ Alaska's online DPP enrolled 1,139 Alaskans in 2023, with an additional 553 signing up between January and early December 2024.⁵ Since the inception of the online DPP, participants have collectively lost over 16,740 pounds, averaging 8 pounds lost per person among those who completed at least four months of the program.⁵ Notably, the benefits of reduced diabetes risk and maintained weight loss can last up to three years after completing the program, benefiting individuals across all racial and ethnic groups, regardless of sex.

Since 2019, in-person DSMES programs that share participant data have served 2,482 Alaskans, with 661 participants across eight programs in 2023.⁵ By connecting Alaskan adults with programs to help them improve their health, CDPHP's [Fresh Start campaign](#) boosted online DSMES enrollment. Enrollment increased from 33 to 238 participants between 2022 and 2023. In 2024, there were 186 new enrollees in the online DSMES program from January to early December.⁵ All DSMES programs include education on Continuous Glucose Monitoring (CGM) and medication management, with peer support available at select locations across Alaska. The Diabetes Prevention and Control Program administers an umbrella license to promote DSMES, focusing on remote areas. In 2024, seven of the 14 DSMES programs in Alaska are under the state's umbrella license, which includes data reporting and facilitation through the accreditation process with the American Diabetes Association. The remaining seven programs operate under their own respective accreditations.

Workforce support and sustainable service delivery

The program supports diabetes prevention and management in Alaska through workforce training for comprehensive diabetes management, educational campaigns, technical assistance, sponsorship of community outreach, and education and screening through the Alaska Health Fair. Support includes piloting programs to reach priority populations in partnership with community agencies such as the YMCA of Anchorage and Anchorage Neighborhood Health Center. Collaboration with other state programs includes Physical Activity and Nutrition, Oral Health, Tobacco Prevention and Control, and many others to tailor a comprehensive approach to diabetes management and prevention.

Heart Disease and Stroke Prevention Program

About the Program

In Alaska, heart disease and strokes cause more than 1 in 5 deaths.^{2,17} Approximately 1 out of 3 (32%) adults have been diagnosed with high blood pressure.¹ Many more adults have high blood pressure and don't know it. [Alaska's Heart Disease and Stroke \(HDSP\) Program](#) works to improve access to screening, prevention, and management for high blood pressure and high cholesterol — which often don't have symptoms. Lowering blood pressure and cholesterol can improve heart and brain health, saving lives and reducing costly medical care.

The cost to Medicaid of uncontrolled blood pressure ranges from \$5,000 to \$19,000 annually per person.¹⁸ Studies show Self-Measured Blood Pressure (SMBP) can save almost \$7,800 in health care costs per person over 20 years.¹⁹ People who are enrolled in SMBP programs measure their blood pressure regularly and share their results with their health care providers. The programs can be used to confirm a high blood pressure diagnosis, gauge how well medication and other steps to manage blood pressure are working, and adjust treatments. Nationally recognized SMBP programs are not fully reimbursed by Medicaid in Alaska.²⁰ This makes it difficult to sustain programs and means enrollment costs are a potential barrier for those who would benefit most. Medicaid reimbursement for SMBP would reduce the health and financial burden of high blood pressure for more Alaskans, while also reducing health care costs.²¹

64%
enrollees now
have
CONTROLLED
BLOOD
PRESSURE

Empower Alaskans for individual wellness

Over the past two years, there has been a substantial increase in the number of Alaska adults joining in-person or online programs supported by Alaska's HDSP Program. With clinical and community partners around the state, Alaskans in many communities can join in-person SMBP programs. For those who prefer online options, Alaska's HDSP continues to support access to online SMBP programs. The number of Alaskans who enrolled in the free online program to lower blood pressure increased from 155 in 2022 to 799 in 2023.⁵ Between January 2024 and early December 2024, 698 Alaskans enrolled in the online blood pressure program.⁵

Studies show that reducing systolic blood pressure by 10 points significantly lowers someone's chances of stroke, heart disease, heart failure, and death.²² A recent survey conducted by Alaska's HDSP Program showed positive outcomes for adults in SMBP programs.⁵ As one example, among those in Alaska's online SMBP program whose first measurement of blood pressure (called systolic) was 140 or higher, they lowered their systolic blood pressure by an average of 11 points.⁵

The places a person spends their time can also have a profound impact on their health, and can influence their efforts to build healthy habits that prevent heart disease, such as eating nutritious food, being physically active, and not using tobacco.¹⁰ The HDSP also works alongside partners to support these healthy habits by working on topics such as food security, access to safe places for physical activity, and access to tobacco cessation programs and smokefree air.

Connect Alaskans to health systems

Disparities in the burden of heart disease and stroke are caused by many complex factors, including urban and rural transportation, geographic distance, economic barriers and socioeconomic factors.²³ These same factors can also influence whether people are able to access health care services, like screening and treatment for blood pressure and cholesterol. The HDSP program collaborates with community and health care organizations that serve populations that may face barriers in accessing health care. For example, the HDSP recently partnered with the Pacific Community of Alaska and the Anchorage Neighborhood Health Center to increase engagement in healthcare services through improved follow-up and access to culturally matched community health workers. This approach to tailor interventions is efficient and effective because it incorporates community member expertise.²⁴

Improve existing health care systems

Alaska's HDSP Program supports health care providers with technical assistance and resources for screening and management of high blood pressure, optimal treatment, and support of a team-based care approach to heart disease. HDSP engages in ongoing collaboration with national partners such as the CDC and the American Heart Association to deliver tailored support to clinics and communities that improve heart health for Alaskans.

Comprehensive Cancer Control Program

About the Program

Cancer has been the leading cause of death in Alaska since 1994.²⁵ Every year, more than 2,000 Alaskans are diagnosed with cancer, and there are an estimated 38,000 cancer survivors living in Alaska.^{26, 27}

There are
38,000
CANCER
SURVIVORS
in Alaska

[Alaska’s Comprehensive Cancer Control Program](#) (Cancer Program, hereafter) focuses on supporting behaviors that protect against cancer, detecting cancer at its earliest stages, improving access to the best treatment available, and improving quality of life for those diagnosed with cancer. Organizations that are involved in these activities are spread across Alaska with different priorities, capacity, and resources. The Cancer Program manages a coalition called the Alaska Cancer Partnership to help these organizations identify areas of collaboration, maximize reach, and learn best practices across the state.

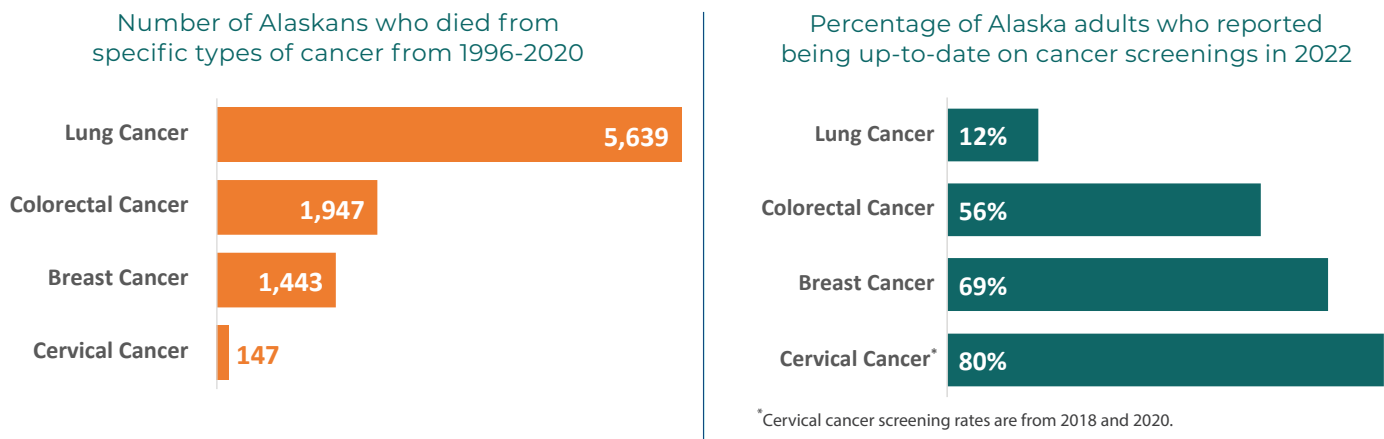
Empower Alaskans for individual wellness

During and after cancer treatment, a survivor’s needs change. A survey among Alaska survivors showed their greatest unmet needs were related to emotional and relationship issues.²⁸ Alaska’s Cancer Program responded by generating and connecting a network of community-based nonprofits across the state that provide resources, events, classes, and programs for survivors and their loved ones as they seek emotional wellness after cancer. The number of nonprofits participating in FY24’s coordinated campaign to honor National Cancer Survivors Day increased from 7 to 13 in the past year.

Connect Alaskans to health systems

Diagnosing a cancer early often leads to better health outcomes, improves quality of life after treatment, and reduces healthcare costs.²⁹ The annual cost to treat cancer in Alaska exceeds \$200 million.³⁰

Screening tests save lives by catching cancer early, yet many Alaskans are not up-to-date on these tests.^{1, 31}



The Cancer Program partnered with community health workers and the Alaska Literacy Program to develop a clear and accessible education tool to improve Alaskans’ understanding of the importance of early diagnosis and screening. This tool has been translated into nine languages and adapted into a health fair poster for group education settings.

Improve existing health care systems

In FY24, the Cancer Program partnered with 26 health centers to implement electronic health record and clinic policy changes to increase vaccinations against human papillomavirus (HPV) among the patients they serve. HPV causes 6 types of cancer. The Cancer Program also convened 15 lung cancer screening programs to discuss common challenges to identify and implement potential solutions.

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Alaska Health Systems Collaboration Unit

FY2024 Annual Report



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December 2024

