



ALASKA NATIVE
TRIBAL HEALTH
CONSORTIUM

A Life Planning Guide for Alaska Native People

Elders, Caregivers, and Health Care Providers

Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium
Elder and Youth Outreach Program
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Disclaimer

This document does not prescribe what should be done. As the title describes, this is a planning guide only. The team that designed this planning guide consulted individuals who possessed cultural, spiritual, ethical, and professional legal backgrounds related to this topic for review and clarification. We care about honoring Alaska Native people transitioning to the spirit world and therefore in this guide we share our concerns, suggestions, and personal teachings to serve as a guide for you and your family, caregiver, and health care provider.

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Overview

The Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (referred to as ANTHC throughout this document) identified a need for a resource to provide guidance for Alaska Native people planning for passing on.

We like to think that we will always be healthy and able to make decisions for ourselves. However, if you develop a sudden illness or serious condition or are involved in an accident, you might not be able to make decisions for yourself.

Making your wishes known while you are still healthy is good to do. Sharing your healthcare decisions with others is the best way to make sure your decisions are respected. Your family and loved ones will benefit from your advance planning. Knowing your wishes will help ease their burden and reduce their uncertainty if they ever must make medical decisions on your behalf.

In this Life Planning Guide, you will learn about the types of decisions you can make ahead of time and how to let others know what you want.

This guide is based on Alaska Native perspectives and lived experiences, as well as the experiences and recommendations from families who have been through this process, health care providers working in this area, and organizations who provide these resources. The intended user of this guide is anyone who wishes to plan ahead of time, including Elders, family caregivers, and health care providers.

We hope this guide will assist those who wish to begin preparations while they are capable of communicating their wishes and directions to their family caregivers, loved ones, and their health care providers. We encourage everyone to explore this guide, look up the resources, ask questions, and think about what your wishes are for when tough decisions arise.

Often, when a person passes on, the families are left to do the planning, which can lead to stressful situations. Family members and others often must make tough decisions without knowing your wishes—while at the same time, they are immersed in grief. A developed outline, statement, or “will,” can provide peace of mind. The will gives specific directions to the family about your wishes for funeral arrangements, closing their deceased person’s estate, and any other end-of-life tasks.

We want to thank everyone who offered their input in the development of this Life Planning Guide.

Introduction

We all know that we will pass on at some point, but do not always prepare for it. The ANTHC Elder and Youth Outreach Program received a two-year grant from the May and Stanley Smith Charitable Trust to develop this Alaska Native Life Planning Guide (referred to as the Life Planning Guide throughout document) to be made available to everyone within the Alaska Native Tribal Health System. This Guide will provide useful resources and information for the following audiences: Alaska Native Elders, their caregivers, and medical providers.

This guide lays out important reasons why each person should plan for their end of life in the physical world. It also provides guidance for how to make their last wishes clear to their family members, caregivers, and medical providers. For families that are grieving, having a will and pre-planning ensures that they do not have to guess what the wish of their loved one is. In some families, there might be tensions or conflicts about protocols around dying, death, and burial. With an Advanced Health Care Directive, the appointment of a Power of Attorney, a will, and last wishes for funeral planning, you will have a say in this important stage of life.

This guide includes the following topics:



Leaving instructions for family:
End of life care, funeral, and burial plans



Life Planning Checklist to
guide family discussions



Describing cultural
protocols and customs

Phases of Life Planning

As we grow older, we may change our decisions and wishes on what we want to happen. Some of your decisions about the topics in this guide may change over time, and that is okay. Just remember to update all your checklists and forms.

You can think of this process in three phases:

- 1 Awareness** of life planning and what needs to be completed and in your files in case of an emergency. You can create awareness by reading this guide with your family, children, or others close to you. Share your responses to the questions and topics and be open to different options, opinions, and ideas. We realize these conversations typically happen when we are older, but it is never too early or late to have these conversations with your family, including your children and grandchildren.
- 2 Active Planning.** When you are going through this guide with another person, or more than one person, read each section and begin discussing with others how you will answer questions and the checklists. This active planning will help you make these decisions and share them with others in your family, as well as your caregiver and healthcare provider, when you reach the third phase. Having these planning conversations will enable you to talk through your decisions with someone else, explore all the resources and options, figure out where you need to get more answers, such as from a regional Native Corporation, and what type of information you need to complete the forms and checklists. The other benefit of this active planning is that the important people in your life, including your healthcare provider, will know you have put a lot of thought into your decisions and will respect them knowing your views and wishes.
- 3 Completion of Paperwork.** This can be done with everyone you have worked with, but also with your caregiver and healthcare provider, attorney, representative from your regional Native Corporation. As you complete your paperwork, you will want to tell others where you will be storing your original copies, and how to access them. You will want to share a copy with the people you chose to be your decision makers, your Durable Power of Attorney, your Healthcare Proxy, your caregiver, and your healthcare provider.

Cultural Protocols and Customs

Cultural protocols and customs vary among Alaska Native peoples. Each Alaska Native cultural group is culturally, geographically, linguistically, and spiritually diverse, which also impacts their values, beliefs, and customs when it comes to passing on. Be mindful that each tribal group, family, and community may have their own ceremonies on how a loved one who has left them is to be remembered and laid to rest. Respect that by asking questions if unsure about the protocol and allow them to have their ceremonies how they think is best. In general terms, communities have practices to support the bereaved family, and the aim is to follow the family/community protocols on how a dearly beloved is to be laid to rest. Often, one family member is the “go to” person, the one who coordinates events, contacts Elders, advises the family on steps to take, and communicates with the community.

Protocols may include smudging ceremonies, prayers, songs, and food. Some Alaska Native cultures have their own, specific traditions. Details of specific traditions include wakes, preparing the body for burial, choosing and preparing the burial site, feasts, and distribution of the person’s ceremonial possessions. Elders are often the leaders in ceremonies and are knowledgeable about protocols and traditions in their specific community.

The details of these traditions are not included in this document because they are the subject of many oral teachings which have been handed down through the generations. Families who want traditional ceremonies for their loved one should consult with Elders in their community to learn the traditional ceremonies of their people.

An advance care plan describes what is important to you and the healthcare and treatments you want.

Advance Care Plan

You and your healthcare team can work together to make an advance care plan which may include requested cultural protocols/customs. This plan will help the healthcare team caring for you, your family, and loved ones make decisions about your care if you can no longer tell them what you want.

This advance care plan is yours. You can show it to anyone involved in your healthcare and give a copy of it to your family and loved ones. You can add to your plan as often as you like and change your decisions at any time. It is important to share any changes you make with the people who have a previous copy of your plan.

What Matters to You

Preparation

Before going into depth on the medical, legal, cultural, and spiritual aspects of life planning, it is important to start your conversation on “what matters to you in life.” This is a time for you to reflect on your life, your favorite memories, people in your life who had a significant impact, who are still close to you, and what matters to you today. The topic of life planning is often discussed by others, and you may have thought about this topic, and you may even have had conversations with your family, caregiver, or healthcare provider on some wishes you have. This topic is always in the back of your mind, usually brought to your attention by someone else making these plans, hearing of someone having an accident, or passing on unexpectedly, reminding you how precious life is, as well as how unknown the future is. It is okay to have some uncomfortable feelings when you think about this topic, that is completely normal. The more you think about this topic, talk to others about this topic, it may become a little easier to talk about, or at least know what you feel about it as well as what others think. Be kind to yourself and take your time but try to work through this Guide regularly. You can read one section and take time away to reflect on the questions you read, on what you would like, and reflect on what you want others to know about how you feel and what you decide.

Here are some questions to help you work out what matters to you:

- What makes you happy?
- What brings you pleasure and joy?
- How do you like to spend your time?
- What are your hobbies and interests?
- Are there routines you really like? For example, how do you like to start or end your day?
- What makes each day meaningful?
- Who do you like spending time with?
- Do you have cultural, religious, spiritual rituals, or beliefs?

Here are some other things that might be important or meaningful to you:

- Being able to talk to and be close to people
- Being aware of who and where you are
- Being able to feel the love and concern of others
- Being able to live a life that is meaningful
- Being close to a pet
- Being able to attend to your spirituality or religion
- Being able to contribute to society
- Being hugged or having your hand held
- Being able to walk and/or move around by yourself

As you begin reflecting on these questions, you may want to write down some notes to keep track of what you want others to know. For example, after you reflect on these questions and write down your answers and thoughts on what matters most, here are some prompts you can use to help you put together responses to share with others:

- **This is what I want my family, loved ones, my family caregiver(s), and health care providers to know about who I am and what matters to me ...**
- **My cultural, religious, and spiritual values, rituals and beliefs I want others to know about that are important to me are ...**
- **To honor these beliefs, I want my family, loved ones, caregivers, and medical providers to ...**

How I Make Decisions

We want you to think about the decisions you might need to make about your health. Think about how you like to make decisions. Do you need time to think about all the information you received and take your time to make final decisions? Do you like to have lots of information and options, or do you prefer to let someone else in your family or community decide for you?

Sometimes you might be faced with having to make a healthcare decision in a crisis (such as an accident or you become unexpectedly sick). This can be made easier for you if you have already thought about how you like to make decisions and who you want to get involved in when making these decisions.

It is also important to decide who will make decisions for you when you are not able. If you are too sick or unable to speak for yourself, others will need to help make the decisions for you. It will be important for you to talk to them about what matters to you and what you want or do not want to happen, while you still can. If you want a person to make decisions for you, consider making them your Power of Attorney (POA) for personal care and wellbeing related issues. This means they can be involved in most decisions about your care. This person will not make decisions for you unless you can no longer decide for yourself.

If you appoint a POA for healthcare, include them in any discussions about your future care and treatment options. Talk them through your advance care plan and give them a copy. If you do not have a POA for healthcare, it is good to name someone to help your healthcare team make the best decisions for you. Talk to this person about what is important to you and how you feel.

There are additional resources available to you such as the Alaska Legal Services Corporation who provides a booklet with helpful information you need to know as you begin life planning. You can also read more about a Durable Power of Attorney and Health Care Power of Attorney through the State of Alaska, Court System (<https://courts.alaska.gov/shc/family/shcpoa.htm>).

For both your power of attorney for healthcare, and your nominated person, choose someone who:

- Knows you well
- Cares about what is important to you
- Helps you without taking over
- Listens to you and is respectful
- Will tell people about your wishes and try to make sure they happen

Legal Issues to Consider

Will

Everyone should have a will. By making a will you:

- **Decide who will inherit your finances, your property, and any of your other personal possessions**
- **Avoid delays in settling your estate**
- **Avoid family conflicts by expressing your wishes in writing**

State laws determine how your assets are split if you do not have a will. If you do not have a will, your estate can be tied up in the courts for a long time (probate). In the end, the court and the government will decide who gets what. In Alaska, the rules on inheritance are found on the Alaska Court System website.

Most people will contact a lawyer to prepare a will. You can also find information online, at the public library, or in pamphlets available through the tribal, local, and federal governments.

Making a will should not be too difficult, nor overly expensive. Most lawyers charge one set fee to write a will. Costs may vary. Whatever the cost, it is worth it. Here are some important points to consider when preparing your will:

Choose an executor

The executor is the person you name to carry out the directives in your will, making sure that whatever you decide, prior to your death, happens. That person will also be responsible for paying final taxes and debts, dividing property, and closing out financial accounts. Usually, people choose a trusted friend or relative, but they can choose a lawyer. Being an executor is a big job with a lot of responsibility. A percentage of the estate is set aside to pay the person for their time and effort. Be sure to ask the person you choose to be your Executor if they are willing to take on the task.

Name a guardian for children

If you have children under 18 years of age, and/or other dependents you should name a guardian to look after them if something happens and you are unable to care for them. You want to be the one in charge of choosing a guardian. Choose a friend or relative you trust who shares similar values and if your kids are old enough, consider consulting them as well.

Keep the original will in a safe place and a copy at home

Only an original will—no photocopies—can be shown in court. Usually, the will owner keeps the original will in a safe, a safety deposit box, or in the safekeeping of a lawyer. There have been court cases where the original will was not presented in court, and so the judge did not follow the wishes of the deceased. Make sure the executor and other significant people know where the original will is stored.

Update your will regularly

As your circumstances change, so should your will. Thus, it is important to update your will when there are major changes. For example, major changes can include changes within your family, your financial situation, or your residence. A general guideline is to review your will every five years. Consult an attorney if it is better to revoke your old will and make a new will.



Powers of Attorney

There are two Powers of Attorney (POA) that you need to appoint: one to look after your finances and one to look after your healthcare needs. It does not have to be the same person, but it could be. These people do the same job as an executor, but they only come into play if you are still alive and incapacitated. Be sure to ask the people you choose to be your POA if they are willing to take on the task. It is important to check your State of Residence to see if the POA is separate from Advanced Health Care Directives. The State of Alaska (SoA) has separate POA and Advanced Health Care Directives and more information can be found on the www.courts.alaska.gov website, under the section of Family Law, category Other Issues, Power of Attorney. You can also download these documents from the website to start the process.

If you are consulting a lawyer, the POA documents can be prepared at the same time as your will. Keep the documents in a safe place, and be sure to tell the Executor, and POAs, where the documents are located. If you cannot afford an attorney or are 60 years or older, Alaska Legal Services Corporation (ALSC) may be able to assist you. Your regional Native Corporation may also have a legal department that can assist you through these documents and processes.

Financial and Legal Power of Attorney:

The financial POA will pay your debts using your funds and handle your financial matters.

The POA document allows a person to list more than one person (agent). If more than one agent is listed, there is a question to see if the agents may exercise the powers conferred separately, without the consent of any other agent, or if they need to exercise powers conferred jointly.

Health Care Power of Attorney:

The healthcare POA will follow your directions on health care (these are laid out in a document called Advanced Health Care Directive), decide about treatments or surgeries you might need, as well as to withdraw life support if you are not expected to recover.

The State of Alaska Advanced Health Care Directives form lists out optional, first alternate, and second alternates.



Update documents

If either the executor or a POA is no longer able to carry out the duties assigned, be sure to update these legal documents and appoint new people if necessary.

Sensitive or Difficult Topics

Bringing up sensitive, or difficult, topics is extremely hard for everyone and it will be important to have these conversations as soon as possible. It is important to have these discussions when everyone can participate and make decisions. Waiting until it's too late, after one has passed, will make it exceedingly difficult to know how to address these topics in a way that includes the wishes of the person who passed on. Sometimes, upon loved ones' passing, remaining family may be surprised to learn information not previously known. When is the right time to share this information? Or should one share the information at all? It is an individual choice.

An example may be giving birth to children who have never been acknowledged within the family; do I share the information with a confidante in the family, or tell family about these children? This may also include tribal adoptions and their role and participation in the family. We need to determine whether these children will be included. Sometimes this 'new' family member is embraced and other times the family is not so welcoming, which may cause heartbreak. We need to be prepared for the reaction of the recipient of this news, and the long-term impact of sharing undisclosed information.

Think about other topics of importance to share with family. If you have information important for the family's well-being and you wish to share it, choose a confidante.

These are not easy tasks to do. It may be helpful to seek support while you go through this process.

When You Start Your Journey of Passing On

The dying process is different for everyone and will be affected by your age, general health or illnesses, and can happen very quickly or it may take several days.

For example, you might need:

- Pain-relieving medicines and treatments
- Medication to ease breathing difficulties
- Medication to manage nausea

Consider what quality of life may mean to you at this stage of your life:

- Being aware and thinking for yourself
- Communicating with the people who are important to you

What do you think will be important to you as you start your journey:

- When you are close to passing, what do you want or not want?
- When you think about dying, what situations worry you?
- Who do you want with you as you die?
- What kind of spiritual care do you want at the end of your life?
- Where would you like to spend your last few weeks or days?
 - What would be needed for this to happen?

As I start my journey, I would prefer to be cared for by:

- Identify who you want as a caregiver and where you keep their contact information

- Share with loved ones and family who knows how to do this for you

If your condition meant you could not be cared for in your preferred place, where else would you like to be?

- What things would be important?
- For example, having my loved ones around, maintaining my privacy, etc.

Some things for you to think about as you read this Life Planning Guide and reflect on your own passing:

- As I journey on, my quality of life means ...
- Other details about myself and my journey I want you to know include ...

I understand that when I am dying, my comfort and dignity will always be looked after. This will include food and drink if I can have them. In addition, I would like you to:

- Let the people know who are important to me to be with me
- Take out things like tubes that do not add to my comfort
- Stop medications and treatments that do not add to my comfort
- Attend to my religious, cultural, and/or spiritual needs (described earlier)

It is also important for you to think about where you want to pass on. When you are dying, where do you prefer to be cared for? At home, in a hospital, hospice, somewhere else? If it does not matter to you where you pass, let others know that you have no preference and do not mind where you receive care.

This next section is best completed with help from a doctor, nurse, or health care provider or medical specialist.

There are medical procedures that keep you alive or delay death. These may include Do Not Resuscitate (DNR), life support, getting food and drink through a tube, and kidney dialysis. Sometimes treatments can be both helpful and harmful. They may keep you alive, but not conscious, or make you a bit better for a brief time but may cause you pain. You need to decide if this is what you want. Your healthcare team will only offer treatments that you will benefit from, including CPR.

Think about what is important to you. For example, determine your quality of life (how good your life is) or quantity of life (how long your life is)? Are there circumstances in which you would want to stop being kept alive and be made comfortable so you can have a natural death?

If you are seriously ill and unable to make decisions for yourself, think about the care you would like to receive.

My Directions for End-of-Life Care

What happens when a person is no longer able to care for themselves? What happens when a person is unable to make decisions for themselves? Sometimes death is sudden, sometimes it is anticipated. One day a person may be healthy and in full control of their faculties, then through illness or accident, the person may be suddenly unable to make decisions or care for themselves. With advance planning you can let your family know your wishes for your end-of-life care and give them direction on important decisions that need to be made at this critical time.

Where to Pass On

Many people die or pass on in a hospital where they receive the urgent medical care and pain management they need at this critical time. If a person is suffering with a terminal illness, they may choose palliative care or hospice. Some people choose to die at home.

Consider whether a family will be able to handle the physical, financial, and emotional challenges of the decision to die in the hospital, a facility, or at home.

What is your preference about where you would like to pass on? Let your family know your wishes but understand that sometimes circumstances will force a different outcome.

Long Term Care

When illness, accident, or age-related infirmity create circumstances where a person is unable to care for themselves, long-term care might be considered. Usually provided in a nursing home, long-term care can involve everything: feeding, bathing, assistance with toileting, medication, and physical movement or positioning. Many may object to long-term care, saying that they want to remain home with their families. It is important to take into consideration what capacity the family has to provide the care needed: equipment, time, physical ability, knowledge, and skill. Sometimes long-term care is the best option.

Decide: Is long-term care an option to be considered? If so, think about if you are eligible for financial support, or if you have financial means to cover costs?

Life Support

At the end of life, sometimes the body can no longer function without help from machines (such as ventilators). Sometimes, life support helps the patient recover. Sometimes, life support is prolonging the inevitable. This is a difficult decision for grieving family members who are often reluctant to “turn off the machine,” to let go of the loved one. It is a tremendous help to your family to know your wishes in advance.

Decide: Do you want life support if there is no chance of recovery? Let your family know your wishes.

Spiritual and/or Religious Guidance

Most people want their family with them when their time to pass on is approaching. Some people may wish to have spiritual and/or religious guidance for this time of transition.

Decide: Do you want an Elder or clergy to visit when your life is near the end? Let your family know.

Do Not Resuscitate (DNR)

Doctors take an oath to do everything possible to save someone's life. However, there are situations when their efforts may only prolong the agony or the death. You need to leave clear instructions with your family about whether you want to be resuscitated, that is, brought back to life, or not.

For example, you may be near the end of life and your heart stops. Do you want the doctors to make every effort to re-start your heart or are you okay with letting your heart stop beating and not be restarted by the doctor or medical machines? This is especially important for elderly patients. Sometimes the medical procedures used to bring them back to life, or to keep them alive, are damaging and painful.

Instructions to let nature take its course are called a DNR, which stands for “DO NOT RESUSCITATE.” You can keep the DNR order at home where family and Emergency Medical personnel can see it (such as on the fridge or the older adult’s bedroom). If you are in a hospital at this time, the DNR is posted so that all doctors and staff know your wishes. Without these specific instructions, grieving family members may want doctors to do everything possible to extend your life, even if that course may be painful for you.

Decide: Do you want a DNR order? Or do you want the doctors to try to save your life regardless of the pain and damage it may cause you? Let your family know your wishes.

Organ Donation

In Alaska, and nationwide, there is a shortage of available organs for transplantation. While agreeing to be an organ donor is a very personal decision, it is an important conversation within families about end-of-life care because your healthcare team will ask family members to make the final decision on your behalf.

Individuals can indicate their willingness to become an organ donor by the red heart on the front of their identification card or driver’s license. The State of Alaska has an online registry on MyAlaska website (same website you apply for your PFD) for people to sign up and declare their decision to donate their organs. It is important for individuals to let their family members know what their wishes are regarding organ donor. This discussion allows your family members to know what your wishes are and to agree to honor your intention at the time of your passing. In situations where patients are near death and cannot indicate their wishes and they meet the medical criteria to be an organ donor, healthcare providers will check the database to see if the patient wants to be an organ donor or not. The healthcare team will ask the family to confirm the decision on your behalf. The healthcare team will explain to your family what the medical procedure and protocols are for procurement of your organs. At this time, your family can request any necessary ceremony be conducted.

Have you considered organ tissue and cornea donation? Donated organs and tissues may help others. For further information go to <https://alaskadonorregistry.org> or www.organdonor.gov.

Decide: Do you want to donate your organs?

My Directions for Services and Burial

There are many options for services and burial. Some people leave most, if not all, arrangements to their family. However, you may wish to provide your family with directions on your services and burial. It will eliminate guesswork and mediate differing opinions among family members during an emotional time. Alaska Native people have diverse cultural backgrounds and may choose a traditional service and burial based on the customs and beliefs from their culture. In many Alaska Native communities, the ceremonies follow traditional customs. Elders and/or cultural bearers can help make sure that everything is done according to the protocol. If what you want differs from traditional protocol, communities are usually responsive to the wishes of the family and the deceased.

General considerations when providing directions for services and burial:

- **Written or oral instructions:** Do you wish to write down your instructions? Or would you prefer to simply talk to your family and let them know your preferences? If you have detailed instructions (for example, about music, scriptures, readings, speakers, etc.) you may wish to write them down.
- **Type of service:** You may want to follow the traditions and protocols of your community and family. However, you can also make different choices. Things to consider:
 - Do you want a service at all? If you do not, how can you assist your family and friends to remember and honor you in a way that does not go against your wishes.
 - What kind of funeral do you want: Traditional ceremony, church (which church) service, a non-denominational service (e.g., a funeral home), a celebration of life, or a blend?
- **Do you want to be buried or cremated?**

- **Do you want an open casket or closed?** You can have a casket even if you choose to be cremated.
- **Location:** A wake, or memorial service, may occur in one location, or in more than one place, e.g., you could hold a community celebration, followed by a service and/or burial in your home village/community. We sometimes see these celebrations occur in private homes.
 - For services and burial in the city, find in advance a funeral home that will accommodate your wishes. Or identify an alternate location to hold your service. Identifying potential places ahead of time will eliminate stress for family members.

Decide:

- **Where do you want the service to take place? For example, in a church, a community hall, or outdoors?**
- **Where do you want to be buried? Or have your ashes buried, stored, or spread?**

Coordination of Activities

As you begin making these plans, you will also reduce the amount of stress and confusion for the decision-maker and organizer. When you are thinking of who this person should be, and ask them to serve in this role, you will want to make sure they have what they need from family and friends. This will be a challenging time for everyone and it will be important for everyone to have support and family and friends they can lean on.

You may wish to appoint someone to arrange or direct the funeral. This person can:

- Help the family to plan with the funeral home
- Share information about the arrangements and answer questions
- Respond to media requests for a story about the deceased
- Invite speakers, and individuals to lead parts of ceremonies, following appropriate cultural protocols

Officiants: Elders or Clergy

You may request a certain person, Elder, or clergy to carry out the ceremony. Let your family know your preference.

Decide if you want the following:

- **Traditional ceremony**
- **A religious service**
- **A non-denominational service or a blend**

Pallbearers

Pallbearers are family members or persons close to the individual who passed on. They help transport the casket during the funeral and ensure that the casket does not get damaged. It is usually an honor to have this role.

Decide: Do you want pallbearers? If so, who do you want to be your pallbearers?

Paying for the Funeral

Pay in advance:

If people have the financial resources to pre-pay funeral costs, this may help a family through the challenging task of planning and completion of a ceremony. Pre-paying for the funeral costs and other associated costs will not place your family in a difficult situation if they do not have the money available to cover the costs.

Other sources:

Employers—present and past—may have funds for their employees’ funerals, as well as for the funerals of their spouses.

Funding sources may also be available through Alaska Native regional of Village Corporations.

Tribes receive limited funds from the BIA social services program for burial assistance and may help cover costs.

If funds are limited, the State of Alaska (SoA) General Relief Assistance (GRA) program provides limited funds for burial of the person who passed on. The program is state funded and individuals or families must meet eligibility criteria that includes being an Alaska resident and have income and resource limitations. More information about the GRA program and application can be found on the State of Alaska Department Health website under the Public Assistance program. It is important to verify if other funding sources can be used if you are using funds from the SoA.

If there is a life insurance policy, remember to inform your family about the life insurance policy.

Preparing the Body

For most Alaska Native peoples, getting the body ready is preparing a loved one for their 'journey home.' You or your loved one may select a casket for this journey. You may leave instructions as to how you will be prepared for the casket. These may include how you want to be dressed, and what, if any, religious or sacred items you wish to take with you on your journey home. If you are unsure, consult Elders and/or a cultural bearers to advise you on what to include in the casket.

Funeral or Memorial Service

A funeral/memorial service is often held to support the family, to visit with one another, and to visit with the deceased. At a funeral/memorial service, family and friends may sit with the body for hours or days depending on the circumstances. There may be a formal service, or there may be speakers and some teaching from Elders. Food is usually provided. Music, storytelling, and card playing are common activities at a wake. Pictures may be displayed which reflect the deceased's achievements, personality, and family connections. The photos also honor the deceased and are typically on display until the end of the funeral services and the final meal.

Decide:

- Do you want a funeral or memorial service?
- Do you want an open or a closed casket?
- Which pictures would you like included in the display?
- Which songs or music would you like played or sung?

Service Content

Funeral services vary greatly. Services may include traditional services, traditional church services, or there could be a blend of both. A ceremony can vary according to the person and their life's achievements, i.e., Veterans have a specific order of services and have rituals such as wearing poppies, playing the bugle with the Last Post, and saluting the deceased comrade. A eulogy is usually delivered at the service.

Decide:

- Do you prefer drumming, singing, church music, or both?
- Who do you want to deliver the eulogy?
- If you choose cremation, you can be cremated before or after the service.

You can have either a casket at the service or the urn with your ashes. Or if the casket or urn is not there,

you can display a portrait. You can choose your photo ahead of time or let your family select it.

Obituary

An obituary is a notice of death published in the newspaper, online, or on a funeral home website. It may include a photo, date and cause of death, a brief biography, and the person's names, often obtained at the ceremony. It could include the funeral event details, list surviving and predeceased family members, and provide special messages, for example, the use of flowers or instructions for charitable donations and gifts.

Decide: Who will write your obituary (you can do it yourself)? Include the details you want to have in your obituary.

Funeral Cards

Funeral cards are often given out at the wake and funeral service. Cards may include: a photo, a prayer or message, birth and death dates and places, spirit/traditional name, actual and honorary pallbearers, predeceased and surviving family members, a brief biography, place of interment, or the final resting place, and Elder or clergy officiating. Family and friends treasure funeral cards. They are precious keepsakes that preserve memories of their loved ones.

Decide: Do you want funeral cards?

Food or Potlach

Food services may vary in accordance with the type of ceremony and celebration. The family may ask a head cook to direct the food services. Certain protocols are often followed for the final feast (or meal or lunch) and the cooks will know the traditional foods to be served.

Decide: Will there be a feast? Will there be follow-up feasts (e.g. 40 Day, 90 Day, annual)?

Burial Information

Religious beliefs or family tradition may influence where you choose to be buried, for example, burial at a church cemetery or at the cemetery in your local community. You may select the location for burial: city/town or rural. Urban burials are gaining popularity; however, they involve added costs. Research the costs and procedures for being buried in the city.

In recent years, more people are choosing cremation. Some people may choose this option as a way of being buried close to their family, or it may be a practical solution depending on the cause and place of death.

Decide:

- Where do you want to be buried?
- Is it important to be laid to rest with your family?

Graveside Ceremony

The graveside ceremony can vary according to the person, i.e., a Veteran's ceremony, which may follow a certain procedure. Certain songs or prayers may be delivered at this ceremony. Elders usually provide specific directions when viewing the grave for the last time and for departing the graveyard.

Let your family know your preferences. Write them down and give them to key people. Should there be cremation, you may wish to leave specific instructions.

After My Passing

- Have you considered leaving your body to medical science? There are specific processes and forms that need to be completed. For further information, contact a local university medical school.
- Do you have any body parts that need to be returned to you? Immediately after death or in the time between death and your funeral, are there any ceremonies or rituals you would like performed?
- Is it important where your body is kept?

Questions to Think About

- Is there anything important you want your family and loved ones to know?
- Where is your will and other important documents stored?
- Are there any financial records or bank account details that need to be managed?
- Have you thought about your email, social media, or Facebook accounts and how those should be managed?
- In the years after your passing, are there ways you would like to be remembered?
- Do you have any final words for your loved ones?

My Directions for Giving Possessions

We may have acquired possessions over the years which we want to pass on to our family and friends. Some examples of these possessions may include personal items such as: jewelry, mementos, clothing, household items, art, photographs, religious and Native ceremonial items. Directions for allocating and gifting possessions are especially important to ensure that one's possessions or gifts are assigned; this process eliminates guesswork or conflict over possessions. This may be an uncomfortable discussion, or activity to complete together, for many people, so it is important to have these discussions and decisions made before passing on.

Traditionally, protocol dictates how personal possessions of the deceased are given to people in the community. You or your family may gift certain items to certain people. In some Alaska Native cultures, certain items may be disposed of. Check with the Elders, cultural bearers, or family members for direction.

It is also important to consider your family history, including tribal adoptions, and how these relationships play into this aspect of planning. It will be important to involve as many family members as possible in this aspect of planning to ensure everyone feels heard, involved in the planning, and respected in the giving away of belongings and keeping belongings (if appropriate).

- If you own a house, land, a fishing boat/skiff, a snowmachine, or other items of value, you can direct that the items be given to someone you designate or that they be sold and that the proceeds be given in various amounts to designees. If the house is located on Native land, check with your Tribe and/or Native Corporation about regulations for succession planning for the house.
- Financial donations may be made to charitable causes and community groups. If you have shares from your regional or village Native Corporation, find out if you have a stock will. Note, if you have both regional and village corporation shares, you may need to have a stock will for both corporations. Contact your corporation to find out their processes.

Decide: To whom do you want to give your possessions?

For Caregivers: Coping with Grief

Most of us have experienced intense grief already. We may have lost parents, children, family members, friends, and pets. We may also grieve when we lose 'something.' For example, we may lose mobility, a home (if moving into a care home), our health and wellness, or a meaningful job or career. We may have suffered loss and trauma such as a disconnect from our biological family via boarding schools, adoption, or other reasons. Perhaps even planning our own funeral or writing a will may cause some trauma or grief. In preparing to pass on, we must also accept that we may not see our loved ones again, and that there will come a time when we can no longer be there to help and support our families.

There are excellent books, such as Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and David Kessler's "Five Stages of Grief," and Atul Guwande's "Being Mortal." There are also many resources on the internet that describe the grief cycle and grieving. In addition, there are many counselors available to help with these difficult matters. Refer to your behavioral health provider or other trusted people in your community.

When you discuss the topic of funeral planning with family, there will be grief and it may be wise to have support available. Affirm that grief is inevitable, and it is okay.

Understand your Grief

Knowing what grief is and how it affects you is one way of taking care of yourself. When you go through a journey of pain following the passing of a loved one, or any other type of grief, it will help you understand what to expect. There are books on grief that address every kind of loss (see list of references at end of document). You can look through the books that address the emotions you are feeling and experiencing; the books provide tips, stories, and recommendations to help you with your grieving process.

The more you know about what you are feeling, the easier it becomes to accept the grieving process. You will also find that you may become less anxious and may worry less when you experience some of the more uncomfortable feelings associated with loss.

Historical Trauma

It is important that we acknowledge and consider the role historical trauma plays in how we interact in relationships, especially grief. First, let us define trauma. Trauma is subjective, meaning that two people can experience a similar event and have different emotional responses to the event. Trauma is an emotional response to an event, like a pandemic, death or separation, community violence, or abuse. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical feelings. Long term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships, and even physical symptoms. Trauma can also be historical, meaning that an event happened in multiple generations of family members and the emotional, and physical, impacts are felt in the present generation.

Dr. Maria Yellow Horse defines historical trauma as "cumulative and collective psychological and emotional injury sustained over a lifetime and across generations resulting from massive group experiences."¹ When trauma occurs over lifetimes and multiple generations to large groups of people, this is called historical trauma. These traumas disrupted the traditional ways of parenting and traditional teachings across generations and disrupted the development of healthy family and community relationships. Today, community members experience constant conflict between their traditional lifestyle and perceived mainstream/Western values. The effects of historical trauma can make it hard for people to be balanced, healthy beings that use effective caregiving skills to help children be healthy and balanced too.

"It is only through this heart-to-heart dialogue, no matter how painful or embarrassing the subject, that the deadly stresses born of trauma on top of trauma can be released."

Harold Napoleon, *Yuuyaraq: The Way of the Human Being*¹

¹ Napoleon, H. (1991). *Yuuyaraq: The way of the human being*. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Fairbanks, Center for Cross-Cultural Studies.

Acknowledging and starting the healing process of historical trauma can be done in several ways. One such way is by honoring the traditional practices of our elders and passing on. Dr. Rita Pitka Blumenstein, Traditional Doctor and one of the 13 grandmothers of the earth, notes from her own path of healing.

"The past is not a burden; it is a scaffold which brought us to this day. We are free to be who we are – to create our own life out of our past and out of the present. We are our ancestors. When we can heal ourselves, we also heal our ancestors, our grandmothers, our grandfathers, and our children. When we heal ourselves, we heal Mother Earth."

The late Dr. Rita Pitka Blumenstein, Traditional Doctor²

Stress Management

Stress is a normal physical reaction to the demands of life. Your brain comes hard-wired with an alarm system for your protection. Stressful or critical events, like the loss of a loved one, have the potential to cause distress and can overwhelm a person's coping skills. To reduce the effect of stressful or critical events, short term strategies can be used to help people build resilience.

Here is a list of ways to help people, or yourself, process the stressful response to a loss:

- Acknowledgement of the loss by talking with someone about your grief.
- Seeking out mental health supports like clergy, talking circles, tribal healers, spiritual guide, or even professional counseling.
- Develop a long-term plan for managing stress and a list of healthy coping resources.
- If you are helping others, use of active listening skills e.g. asking open-ended questions, using their words to confirm emotions, use of non-judgmental terms.

Self-Care During Grieving

It is important to care for yourself while you are grieving. Take as much time as you need, and seek and accept support from a trusted friend, family member, or mental health professional when you need it.

Grief support groups are also a way to practice self-care. For Alaska Native and American Indian (AN/AI) people who receive services through the Alaska Tribal Health System, grief and loss learning circles are available online and through some of our

Tribal Health organizations such as the Southcentral Foundation Family Wellness Warriors and the ANTHC Behavioral Health Wellness Clinic. Referral support is also available for AN/AI people with the ANTHC BHCW for one-one consultation via telehealth and offers additional counseling services. The Alaska End-of-Life Alliance also offers life planning and grief support resources at www.alaskaendoflifealliance.org.

Get Proper Rest

Getting an adequate amount of sleep or rest is sometimes tricky when you are grieving. It is normal to lose sleep in the first few days following a death or other traumatic event. Fear and anxiety tend to overwhelm your thoughts, making it difficult to settle down at night when everyone else is sleeping.

Consider listening to relaxing music before bedtime, meditating, or drinking some tea for relaxation. You may even ask your community health aide, doctor, or traditional healers for some options they can prescribe to help you relax in the first few days following your loss.

It is also possible to get too much sleep. Discuss this with your doctor if it is happening to you. A sign of depression is when you find it difficult to get out of bed, sleep too much, or otherwise are unable to get your day started. Your doctor can also find a temporary remedy to get you through this stage in your grief.

Sleep problems are common for those who are grieving. Here are some helpful strategies:

- Exercise more during the day: gentle walking, gardening, harvesting, and subsistence activities.
- Keep your bedroom dark and cool.
- Avoid caffeine and limit sugar after 4 pm.

² Ullrich, J. S. (2019). *For the love of our children: An Indigenous connectedness framework*. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 15 (2), 121-130.

- Avoid alcohol. While a person may think it helps them relax, it disrupts deep sleep and REM sleep that a person needs.
- Limit napping.
- Avoid texting, TV/computer, within 1 hour of bedtime.
- Write your to-do list for the next day one hour before bed—do not worry in bed.
- Keep a diary. Two hours before bed write down your worries. Then write three things you are thankful for.
- Bedtime and wake time should not change by more than 1 hour between weekdays and weekends.
- Avoid exercise within 2 hours of bedtime.
- Avoid large meals or beverages right before bedtime.
- Comfort yourself by taking a warm bath or sitting in the steam bath.
- Wrap up in a warm blanket. Put on relaxing music or relaxation tapes and sip your favorite tea or hot chocolate.
- Play music that matches your mood. Feel understood by the songs and singers that share your experiences.
- Especially when you are feeling stressed and overwhelmed, forget about making to-do lists. Instead, at the close of each day, make a list of what has been done.
- Make a list of things you are grateful for.
- Find something to care for, such as a garden or a pet.
- Eat nourishing meals each day, even if the food does not hit your taste buds like you are used to.
- If possible, eat your Alaska Native Foods.
- Breathe – really breathe! Take deep breaths in through the nose and slowly out through the mouth.
- Say “No” to something...and “yes” to yourself. Be realistic about your limitations.
- Try gentle exercise like yoga, tai chi, or walking.
- Spend some time in nature.
- Acknowledge when you are attempting to do too much to occupy your time.
- Share your feelings. Be courageous enough to accept the help and support of others.
- Avoid isolating. Spend time with people who will be okay just sitting with you, listening, and talking when you are ready.
- Draw on spiritual support from others and from your beliefs about a higher power.

If serious symptoms of insomnia continue after using these methods, consider discussing sleep concerns with your primary provider.

Maintain a Healthy Diet

A proper diet and nutrition are also equally as crucial as getting adequate rest. Together, diet and nutrition help maintain a balance inside you so that you are able to better function when things get stressful. Without eating the right food in the right amounts, you may start to feel unable to cope with your everyday routines.

Make time to eat some of your favorite Native foods, go out and spend time on the land, and eat your favorite foods with others, or by yourself.

Taking Care of Yourself & Others

Whether you are grieving or taking care of others who are grieving, here are some self-care tips:

- Lie in the sun streaming in through your windows.
- Designate an afternoon or evening and take the phone off the hook, turn off your cellphone, and spend some time in the quiet.
- When you are worried or obsessed, set up a specific time of the day to “worry” for 20 minutes. Set a timer. When the time is up, do something rewarding for yourself.
- Do something you like to do, like beading, crafting, cooking, or other activities that make you happy.

Exercise

Exercise can make you focus on your health and your body rather than what has happened. Going for a walk can brighten the mood and alleviate tension.

Finding someone to exercise with can make you more motivated to get moving. Even just walking around the yard, or your neighborhood, will turn your focus elsewhere.

Walking, gentle stretching, jogging, gardening, or any physical activity can help relieve emotional pain and increase energy level simultaneously.

Practice Deep Breathing for Stress Management

Deep breathing helps you deal with stress, tension, anxiety, and anger. It can be done anywhere. It helps in many ways.

Steps for this exercise:

1. Find a quiet place where you will not be distracted. If you want, go for a walk, spend time outdoors.
2. You may want to sit in a comfortable chair or lie on the floor with a pillow under the small of your back.
3. Breathe in through your nose, slowly and deeply, pushing your stomach out as you breathe in.
4. Say the word “relax” silently as you breath out. Picture your stress and tension begin to leave as you breathe out.
5. Breathe out slowly through your mouth, letting your stomach come back in.
6. Repeat these deep breaths 10 times. You will notice how much more relaxed you feel after a very few minutes of controlled breathing.

Continuing Your Healing Journey

We hope that this guide will assist in planning for when the time comes and that it will give your family peace of mind and a smooth process to deliver the funeral planning events. We understand how difficult this is, so we encourage you to seek support from your friends, family, mentor, counselor, Elder, cultural bearer, or spiritual advisor.

Even though some of us may not have a significant amount of resources set aside for our own ceremonies, a beautiful honoring can still occur. Our families do come together and support each other for end-of-life celebrations. The attached checklist will help you get organized. Whether your plan is fully completed or partially completed, it will be a gift for the family.

Thank you to the Working Group members who contributed their wisdom and lived experience to this document.

Life Planning Checklist

The following checklist will help organize important documents and papers. It will help identify tasks to be completed, e.g., completing a will and stating a timeline. Some may be applicable to you and some may not be applicable. You may work on this with a partner or have a friend assist you.

You may also need to complete other tasks such as applications for any compensations with eligibility end dates. Or you may wish to consolidate debt.

A well-prepared binder with all the required information is a benefit for your family. Make two copies. Store them in a safe place and tell a family member, friend, or designated Power of Attorney and Executor where you filed this information.

Checklist of Important Documents		
Document	Tentative Date to Complete	Date Completed
Adoption or Guardianship Papers		
Banking / Financial <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bank account(s) and location Bank loan information Bank statements / cancelled checks Credit cards & statements Investment account statements/portfolios Safe deposit box 		
Birth and Baptismal Certificate(s)		
Business <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Licenses Instructions for closing or transferring the business 		
Citizenship: Naturalization or Immigration Certification		
Health / Medical <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Health or medical records Immunization records Medical directives Doctor / Dentist Repeat medication prescription 		
Homeownership <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Appraisal information Home improvement documents House and real estate deeds and titles Mortgage documents 		
Income <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employment Pensions – OAS, CPP, Retirement Guaranteed Income Supplement Stocks / bonds / investments 		
Income Tax <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social Security number Tax filing for appropriate number of years 		
Cultural Possessions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ceremonial items Artifacts Regalia, dance, or ceremonial attire 		
Insurance Policies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Life Vehicle Home valuables 		

Checklist of Important Documents		
Document	Tentative Date to Complete	Date Completed
Inventories <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Household items Safe deposit box 		
Valuable Possessions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Art, jewelry, precious stones Tools equipment Valuation certificates 		
Letter of Last Instructions		
Marriage Certificate		
Military Service <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Military discharge Military uniform(s) & possessions 		
Memberships <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Groups Organizations 		
Passport		
Death Certificates		
Education & Recognitions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Degree Diploma Certificates Achievements 		
Divorce Decree and Settlement Papers		
Employment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Benefits Contracts Employer information 		
Passwords <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Email Social media accounts 		
Power of Attorney		
Prenuptial Agreement		
Receipts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Items under warranty Valuable or expensive items 		
Status <ul style="list-style-type: none"> BIA card Tribal enrollment card Regional village card Village corporation card 		
Subscriptions: Magazines, Papers		
Vehicle(s) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Repair receipts Titles Registration 		
Warranties with Receipts		
Will <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can be hand-written If typed, must have it notarized by an official 		

Glossary of Terms

Advance Care Planning – involves discussing and preparing for future decisions about your medical care if you become seriously ill or unable to share your wishes.

Advanced Health Care Directive – legal documents that provide instructions for medical care only go into effect if you cannot communicate your wishes. There are two types: living will and durable power of attorney for health care.

Living Will – a legal document that tells doctors how you want to be treated if you cannot make your own decisions about emergency medical treatments. This document contains information on which medical treatments or care you want and do not want, and under which conditions each of your decisions and choices should be made.

Durable Power of Attorney/Healthcare Power of Attorney – a legal document that names your health care proxy, a person who can make health care decisions for you if you are unable to communicate these yourself. Your proxy, also known as a representative, surrogate, or agent, should be familiar with your values and wishes. A proxy can be chosen in addition to or instead of a living will. Having a health care proxy helps you plan for situations that cannot be foreseen, such as a serious car accident or stroke.

Healthcare Proxy – a document that names someone you trust as your proxy, or agent, to express your wishes and make health care decisions for you if you are unable to speak for yourself. A health care proxy may also be called a durable medical power of attorney or an appointment of a health care agent or health care surrogate.

Resuscitation – when a medical provider does everything, they can revive your body from apparent death or from being unconscious.

Life Support – the use of specialized equipment to maintain a person's essential physical functions when they are extremely ill or unconscious.

Long Term Services and Supports – refers to both institutional care and home- and community-based services (HCBS). LTSS encompasses the broad range of paid and unpaid medical and personal care assistance

that people may need – for several weeks, months, or years – when they have trouble completing self-care tasks because of aging, chronic illness, or disability.

Will – a legal document that states your wishes and instructions for managing and distributing your estate/belongings after death.

Healthcare Resources and References

Alaska End-of-Life Alliance
<http://www.alaskaendoflifealliance.org>

Alaska Health, Legal, and End-Of-Life Resources
<https://www.everplans.com/articles/alaska-health-legal-and-end-of-life-resources>

ANTHC Palliative Care
<https://anmc.org/services/anthc-palliative-care/>

Comfort Keepers
(end of life care services; call them at 907-855-0186)
<https://www.comfortkeepers.com/offices/alaska/anchorage/care-services/specialized-care/end-of-life-care/>

Durable Power of Attorney and Health Care Power of Attorney
<https://courts.alaska.gov/shc/family/shcpoa.htm>

Foundation for End-of-Life Care (Juneau)
<https://www.foundationforendoflifecareak.org/>

Hospice of Anchorage
(call them at 907-561-5322)
http://www.alaskaccn.com/Hospice_of_Anchorage_FAQs.pdf

Long Term Supports and Services – care facility locator
https://health.alaska.gov/dhcs/Pages/hflc/fac_LTC.aspx

Palliative Care Alaska Network
<https://palliativecarealaska.com/>

State of Alaska Hospice
https://health.alaska.gov/dhcs/Pages/hflc/fac_hospice.aspx

Legal Resources and References

Alaska Law Help
<https://alaskalawhelp.org/resource/advance-health-directive-giving-instructions-for-your-care?ref=Qttnb>

Alaska Legal Services
<https://www.alsc-law.org/>

Alaska Native Law – Alaska Legal Services
<https://www.alsc-law.org/alaska-native/>

Organ Donation
<https://alaskadonorregistry.org> or www.organdonor.gov

Will, Alaska Court System website
<https://alaskalawhelp.org/resource/advance-health-directive-giving-instructions-for-your-care?ref=Qttnb>

State of Alaska Estate Planning
<https://eforms.com/estate-planning/ak/>

Caregiver Resources and References


Five Stages of Grief (Kubler-Ross)
<https://grief.com/the-five-stages-of-grief>

State of Alaska Caregiver Support Services
<https://health.alaska.gov/dsds/Pages/CaregiverSupport.aspx>

Family Caregiver Resources for Alaska
<https://states.aarp.org/alaska/caregiver-resources>

National Family Caregiver Support Program
<https://health.alaska.gov/dsds/Pages/grantservices/NationalFamilyCaregiverSupportProgram.aspx>

Self-care for family caregivers – resources, tips, (Family Caregiver Alliance)
<https://www.caregiver.org/resource/taking-care-you-self-care-family-caregivers/>



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