

Our Mission

With our cultural and traditional wisdom and knowledge, the Alaska Native Elder Health Advisory Committee will advocate for the health and well-being of Alaska Native people.

Our Vision

Alaska Native Elders have access to the long-term care services necessary to keep them as close to home as possible, as healthy and safe as possible, and thus afford them as much independence as possible.



ALASKA NATIVE
TRIBAL HEALTH
CONSORTIUM

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Connecting Culture By Serving Our Elders



Communicating With Elders

anthc.org/elders



Communicating with Elders

When communicating with Elders, it is important to be yourself. Building rapport with Elders is most important. During the initial contact, introduce yourself and reasons for becoming involved with them. Asking the Elder where they are from is a nice opening question.

Create an atmosphere of mutual respect when you begin communicating with an Elder. It is common for an Elder to be quiet or reserved and keep to themselves until they are comfortable with someone. When they do speak, listen to what is being said and respect the time from the Elder. The concept of time is portrayed as “in the moment” rather than “by the clock.”

Observation is important when interacting with Elders. When trust is established, body contact may be appreciated.

Also remember that to Elder’s hunting, fishing and gathering are communal, cultural rituals with spiritual implications tied to the earth and sea. Spirituality is very important to elders; it can instill values of understanding and harmony with nature.

Patterns of Communication

Nonverbal Communication

- Elders appreciate humor, so try to relay information with amusement or laughter.
- If an Elder raises eyebrows, it may mean “yes.”
- If an Elder shrugs shoulders, it may mean “I don’t know.”
- Nodding does not necessarily mean “yes.”
- As a sign of respect for the Elder, avoid making direct eye contact.
- A gentle handshake is a sign of respect.
- Sit still and avoid distractions when speaking and listening to an Elder.

Narrative Communication

- Try to learn a few words in their traditional language to help better communicate with an Elder and to display an interest in them.
- Elders often use stories in traditional teaching and answer questions in a storytelling style.
- If you have questions or comments for an Elder, you should wait until the end of the story to ask them.

Verbal Communication

- Use a soft, gentle tone and simple language.
- Talk at a slow pace and use pauses.
- Elders may think about their answers before responding.
- Ask direct, open-ended questions.
- Be consistent with your voice; do not use high pitches or change your voice as if you were speaking to a child.

Indirect Communication

- Elders may ask for something while not being specific. For example, “I wish I had more coffee” can mean, “If you are going to the store, please pick some up for me” or “I need a ride to the store.”
- Bragging or bringing attention to oneself is not appreciated by Alaska Native or American Indian people, including Elders.
- Being in the moment is best – talking about the future is not meaningful to Elders.
- Use the seasons of the year to talk about time. Example: “When did your knee start hurting?” “When snow came, when snow thawed, etc.”
- Be prepared to restate something you said to an Elder for clarification and better understanding.

Not all American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) Elders will use these patterns, and some may use them only occasionally; it depends upon the situation.