

The *Status of Alaska Natives Report 2004*, prepared by ISER, is a compilation of data on population, health, economy and education. It is a linear timeline that depicts trends over the last thirty years, and it also provides a snapshot of the current Alaska Native population, health, economic condition and education. The data indicate a seeming paradox: that many of the changes have been for the better; and yet, there are disparities and new challenges. There is no single answer to addressing the issues raised by the data in the *Natives 2004* report. But there are at least three areas on which we must work simultaneously: improving public education, continuing to address the health issues (especially behavioral health), and creating jobs and lowering the cost of living in rural Alaska.

When participants in the Policy Center meetings and discussions reviewed the data, they consistently noted that the population, health, economy and education data are inter-related and influence one another in daily life. A very young Native population (44.2% under the age of 20) needs a quality elementary and secondary education, as well as vocational training and college, in order to obtain knowledge and skills necessary to participate in the modern workforce. Significant economic development cannot occur in Alaska, rural or urban, without a well-trained, healthy workforce that is placed in the jobs that currently exist or that might be created through economic development projects.

The population data indicate that large numbers of Alaska Natives will be in the public education system, now and into the future. These findings demand that we all advocate for an education system that addresses the needs of Natives as well as it does for every other child in the classroom.

There will be a continuing and increasing demand for jobs in both rural and urban Alaska. There will also be an increasing demand for health services, particularly for Elders. The mobility of the Native population from rural to urban centers will also require continuing coordination of education, health, housing and other services.

Based on feedback from discussions and regional meetings, participants identified the need for additional data in different formats because it is critical to understanding the status of populations and communities, and to decision-making and allocating resources:

- Make data available by the 12 regions, as well as in urban-and-rural formats, in order to allow regional and local entities to develop scenarios based on current and potential economic development projects. This should include numbers of Alaska Natives in urban centers. If current rural-to-urban migration patterns continue, there will be continued pressures on urban service providers for employment.
- Provide data on the numbers and types of jobs that currently exist in the public and private sectors, by ANCSA region, including local industries/employers (fisheries, tourism, education, health, etc.), and Native profit and non-profit entities. They need to know what jobs they should be preparing for and how to link our educational systems to this process.
- Provide data on telecommunication, energy and transportation infrastructures, by region, for planning purposes. (*Note: some of this information is available from state agencies like the Department of Transportation.*)
- Provide data on food and energy costs by region, and show the relationship of costs to household income in order to see where income goes and if there is any left for discretionary items.
- Provide forecasts of population by region, in order to plan for potential economic development activities, educational needs, and health care.
- Provide accurate data on how many people are actually unemployed. The number of people (of 16 years and older) not in the workforce may be more useful than are current state and federal unemployment statistics.

There is a challenge to understanding the data because there are so many sources that use varying methods of gathering the data. Some of the bigger issues with the data are the accuracy of the rural population count, given the sample sizes and the fact that there is a high level of movement between villages, regional hubs and urban centers. Clearly, we need to have a better understanding of population movement

so that health, educational, employment and other service needs are met.

Another issue that participants raised was that the data currently used to measure the “status” of Alaska Natives are developed from a Western set of values and ways of thinking. The Census is perhaps the best example of this. Western values are attached to the way the questions are asked. The “Survey of Living Conditions in the Arctic”, now being conducted by an international team of research scientists (including ISER), is one study that the Policy Center is aware of that measures standards of living from an indigenous perspective. Even so, the data provided in the *Natives 2004* report are a valuable tool that can be used to address the challenges in health, economy and education.

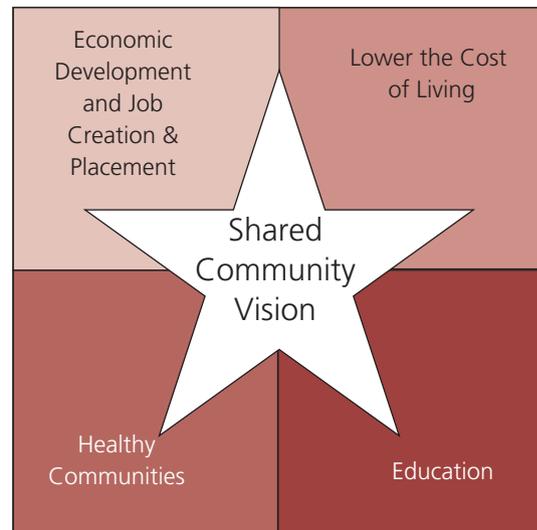
The Policy Center heard many shining examples of how people and organizations are addressing the issues raised by the data. The work that the Cook Inlet Tribal Council is undertaking with Alaska Native high school students in the Anchorage School District, the immersion programs in Southeast schools and in Bethel, the Spirit Camps’ teaching of culture and language, the Alaska Native Science & Engineering Program at the University of Alaska, the Community Development Quota program, the economic force of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act corporations, and the diabetes awareness programs in Norton Sound are all examples of how people and organizations can and do respond.

The Policy Center also heard concern for how Alaska Natives can maintain their own cultures in a modern world of different values. For example, in the discussion of economic development, there is a cultural need to protect subsistence; it is tied to Native values and lifestyles and yet economic development is needed to provide jobs. Some communities and regions are promoting economic development because it is needed. Some communities want to maintain a predominantly subsistence lifestyle. Some individuals in each types of community want to be able to do both. How do Alaska Natives maintain and preserve cultures

given these pressures? Another example, with an increasingly urban Native population, how will the various cultures of Alaska’s Natives be carried on?

Each of the data presentations by the Policy Center closed with the graphic illustration shown below. It is a small jigsaw puzzle, and its centerpiece - “shared community vision” - links together four complex challenges that face Alaska Natives:

- the need for **economic development and job creation and placement**, which will provide family cash income, in combination with subsistence harvesting, in order to strengthen the “mixed” economic base of Native communities;
- the need to **lower the cash cost-of-living** for basic necessities in rural villages (e.g., electricity, fuel oil and food), in order that people can live where they want;
- the need for **healthy communities**, whether in villages or urban areas, with emphasis on behavioral health, individual wellness and disease prevention; and
- the need to **make public schools effective** community institutions that teach Native, as well as non-Native, students the basic academic skills from a culturally relevant context that is needed in a knowledge-based society.



Source: Adapted from “Alaska’s Jobs for Alaska’s People” by Commonwealth North, June 2003

Although there are dozens of other issues facing Alaska Natives, these four are critical. If they can be made better, the whole level of Native life will improve.

But none of these issues can be addressed unless Native individuals and communities take the lead. What is needed is a shared community vision that gives our people a perspective on where we have come from, where we are now, and where we are going - *signs along the trail*. Without such vision, little can change; but with it, wonderful things are possible.