

UNITED STATES SENATE COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS
Oversight Hearing “Water as a Trust Resource: Examining Access in Native Communities”

TESTIMONY OF VALERIE NURR’ARALUK DAVIDSON
PRESIDENT/CEO, ALASKA NATIVE TRIBAL HEALTH CONSORTIUM

September 27, 2023

My name is Valerie Nurr’araluk Davidson. I serve as the President/CEO of the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (ANTHC), a statewide Tribal health organization serving all 229 Tribes and all Alaska Native and American Indian people in Alaska.

Chairman Schatz, Vice Chair Murkowski, and members of the committee, thank you for holding this hearing on water as a trust resource.

Reliable water and sanitation services are critical to the health and well-being of our families and communities.

Alaskans living in communities without access to these services are five times more likely to be hospitalized for lower respiratory tract infections and 11 times more likely to be hospitalized for pneumonia than those with it.¹

My youngest daughter contracted respiratory syncytial virus when she was eight months old and was hospitalized for nine days. Her compromised respiratory system resulted in eight additional hospitalizations before her eighth birthday.

Sadly, her experience is common.

In our unserved communities, we expect one in every three infants to be hospitalized every year — who also then face long-term health challenges.

While significant federal investment over four decades has dramatically reduced the number of unserved communities, roughly 20 percent of rural Alaska Native homes still lack in-home piped water, and 34 communities remain unserved.

Thanks to your leadership, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) provides resources to serve these communities. We especially appreciate your prioritization of projects in communities whose high cost of service historically disqualified them from funding. Without your brilliant vision, communities without running water would have continued to go without it. Our children would have continued to suffer.

On behalf of those who will live healthier lives due to this investment, thank you to the members of this committee for your advocacy and leadership.

¹ The Relationship Between In-Home Water Service and the Risk of Respiratory Tract, Skin, and Gastrointestinal Tract Infections Among Rural Alaska Natives - American Journal of Public Health | November 2008, Vol 98, No. 11

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Thanks also to our partners at the Indian Health Service (IHS) for their work in ensuring these resources reach the communities intended by Congress.

ANTHC fully supports the IHS Fiscal Year (FY) 2023 allocation decision for IJA funding, recognizing the legislation is intended to address the most challenging communities to serve, those considered economically infeasible under IHS policy.

ANTHC also supports the IHS FY 2023 allocation of \$65.5 million for projects that exceeded the original budget estimate due to persistent inflation and ongoing supply chain challenges.

The challenge of rising costs also impact the ongoing operations and maintenance (O&M) of these systems.

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The Indian Health Care Improvement Act recognizes the IHS's authority to provide funding in support of operating, managing, and maintaining tribal water and waste facilities.

In its FY 2024 Congressional Justification, IHS acknowledged this authority and the need for O&M funding.

The inclusion of O&M in the FY24 Congressional Justification is an important step in the right direction.

For decades, ANTHC and our partners in the Alaska Tribal Health System have worked to increase local and regional operational capacity in support of these systems.

While we have made great progress in developing the capacity needed to extend the working life of these systems, the most significant challenge continues to be the lack of ongoing financial resources to support these activities.

We look forward to working with Congress and IHS to ensure the O&M resources necessary to protect the existing and future federal infrastructure investments in our communities.

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ANTHC appreciates the committee's focus on such an important and pressing issue and for the opportunity to provide testimony today.

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