



Akiak
Akiachak
Alakanuk
Andreafsky
Aniak
Anvik
Atmautluak
Bethel
Bill Moor e's Slough
Chefornak
Chevak
Chuathbaluk
Chuloonawick
Crooked Creek
Eek
Emmonak
Georgetown
Grayling
Hamilton
Holy Cross
Hooper Bay
Kasigluk
Kipnuk
Kongiganak
Kotlik
Kwethluk
Kwigillingok
Lime Village
Lower Kalskag
Marshall
Mekoryuk
Mountain Village
Napaimute
Napakiak
Napaskiak
Newtok
Nightmute
Nunam Iqua
Nunapitchuk
Ohogomiut
Oscarville
Paimute
Pilot Station
Pitka's Point
Quinhagak
Red Devil
Russian Mission
Scammon Bay
Shageluk
Sleetmute
St. Mary's
Stony River
Toksook Bay
Tuluksak
Tuntutuliak
Tununak
Umkumiut
Upper Kalskag

U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS

Legislative Hearing on the Veterinary Services to Improve Public Health in Rural Communities Act
July 10, 2024

My name is Commander Brian Lefferts with the US Public Health Service and I am here today on behalf of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation (YKHC) where I have worked for the past 18 years. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the Veterinary Services to Improve Public Health in Rural Communities Act.

YKHC is a tribal health organization of 58 federally-recognized Alaska Native tribes which was formed to administer a comprehensive health care delivery system for the communities of the Yukon-Kuskokwim region in Southwest Alaska. For more than thirty years, we have provided health care services to the people of the region under a Self-Governance Compact with the Indian Health Service under Title V of the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act.

YKHC serves a remote, isolated service area approximately the size of the State of Oregon. This region is the traditional home to Alaska's indigenous Yup'ik, Cup'ik, and Athabascan people, and is not connected to the road system. As of the 2010 Census, 89% of the residents are Alaska Native, around half of the population speaks the Yup'ik or Cup'ik language at home.

YKHC provides a wide variety of community, social, and population health services to the approximately 30,000 residents of the region. Our health system includes 41 village clinics, 5 subregional clinics, a regional hospital, skilled nursing facility and other regional services and programs.

The Alaska Native people in this region suffer dramatic health disparities compared to communities on the road system. Approximately, 1/3 of the homes in the region lack indoor plumbing, and we experience the highest household crowding rates in the United States. The life expectancy of people in this region is 69 years—10 years less than the US average. This decreased life expectancy is driven by elevated cancer incidence, increased prevalence of chronic heart, lung, and liver diseases; high rates of infectious diseases; and high levels of intentional and unintentional injuries, including dog bites.

The Veterinary Services to Improve Public Health in Rural Communities Act, which seeks to modify the Indian Health Care Improvement Act to include

veterinary care, is vital to the health and well-being of Alaska Native communities. Indigenous people have a unique relationship with the land and animals. For thousands of years, this relationship was critical for survival, and it has become the basis of many cultural traditions and their identity as a people. This is especially true in the Yukon-Kuskokwim region where subsistence diets still account for a majority of the foods consumed, and individual and community health are linked to the health of wildlife in the region.

I. Enabling dedicated YKHC staff to investigate zoonotic illness outbreaks and communicate health risks is critical to protecting human health in our region.

Changes to the types of diseases and illnesses affecting the animals in the region is creating new threats to humans that were not historically a concern. For example, we have seen the emergence of brucellosis in caribou and walrus populations and distemper outbreaks in seal populations. These animals provide a critical food source for our communities.

There have also been recent detection of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) H5N1 in wild birds, and there is evidence that these have jumped to some wild mammals in Alaska. As far back as 2005, YKHC has worked with USFWS and tribes in the region to provide HPAI surveillance and monitoring and hunter education as a part of a “be prepared, not scared campaign,” to help ensure our people can continue to participate in subsistence in a safe and healthy way.

These are only two examples which show that having dedicated YKHC staff to investigate zoonotic illness outbreaks and communicate health risks is critical to protecting human health in our region.

II. This Legislation will enable YKHC to help address the most pressing zoonotic illness in the region.

Rabies is the most pressing of zoonotic illness in the region and it poses a significant threat to public health. Rabies is transmitted through bites or contact with infected animals. It is considered enzootic throughout northern and western Alaska where it is always present among fox in the area. Occasionally, we have cases where humans are attacked by rabid fox or wolf, but the greatest risk to humans comes from dogs who have been bitten by an affected fox. The risk of being bitten by a dog in rural Alaska is higher than other areas due to the prevalence of rabies and the large number of stray and unwanted pets that occur in areas without sufficient spay and neuter services.

YKHC’s environmental health services team works with local health aides and medical providers to identify cases of animal bite. In a typical year, there are over 100 dog bite investigations to ensure rabies transmission does not occur, and to determine if post exposure prophylaxis is necessary, which is recommended in approximately 20% of cases. Not only are bites a risk for rabies, but the attack themselves can lead to serious adverse health outcomes or death. We believe this legislation will reduce the incidence of preventable injuries and illnesses among the people of our region.

III. Veterinary Care is Health Care

In 2008, at a joint strategic framework meeting involving the American Medical Association, the American Veterinary Medical Association and other major health groups, the term “One health” was adopted to refer to the interdependence of human, animal, and environmental health. This modern holistic approach aligns with longstanding indigenous understanding that our connectedness to the land and animals are essential to improving not only physical health but also mental, behavioral, emotional, cultural, and spiritual well-being.

This legislation will support the One Health vision and improve health outcomes for our communities by enhancing our ability to address zoonotic diseases and by recognizing veterinary services are a critical function to improve the health status of Alaska Natives. We are excited about this legislative effort and believe it will significantly enhance our ability to ensure the well-being of our people in a culturally relevant way.

Quyana for the opportunity and honor to provide testimony today.

Sincerely,

YUKON-KUSKOKWIM HEALTH CORP.

**CDR Brian Lefferts, MPH
US Public Health Service
Director of Public Health
Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation**