

**2011**  
*Annual Report*

# Alaska AHEC Program

*Strengthening Alaska's health workforce*



The Alaska AHEC Program is a statewide university-industry partnership focused on strengthening Alaska's health workforce.



UAA Alaska Center for Rural Health  
- Area Health Education Center  
UNIVERSITY of ALASKA ANCHORAGE

[www.uaa.alaska.edu/acrh-ahec](http://www.uaa.alaska.edu/acrh-ahec)



## Mission & Organization

The federal Area Health Education Centers (AHEC) Program is funded by the Health Resources and Services Administration, Bureau of Health Professions. While the Program dates back to 1971, the Alaska AHEC was established through the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) in 2005. It was the first in the country to be awarded through a School of Nursing, rather than a School of Medicine.

AHECs consist of interdisciplinary, community-based primary care training programs wherein academic and community leaders strive to improve the distribution, diversity, supply, and quality of healthcare personnel. The Alaska AHEC at UAA contracts with five regional AHEC centers to implement educational activities that involve several health professions and expose students to primary care and to the needs of underserved populations. The training of healthcare personnel is a focus of AHEC with an emphasis on primary care delivery sites in rural and other underserved areas. In addition, the AHECs work closely with state and local workforce investment boards to identify and address healthcare personnel issues.

## Program Areas

The Alaska AHEC addresses its mission by working in three distinct areas by:

- Encouraging Alaskans from disadvantaged backgrounds into health careers;
- Coordinating clinical experiences for health professions students in rural communities and with underserved populations to encourage employment in these areas; and
- Facilitating connections to CE/CME for providers in underserved areas to enhance health workforce retention.

## Host Organizations

The Alaska AHEC Program Office is located at the University of Alaska Anchorage under the School of Nursing and the Office of Health Programs Development. The Program Office partners with five industry hosts to carry out the AHEC mission. Host organizations provide invaluable support to the AHECs that benefit the entire region's health workforce and ultimately the health status of its people.

## Alaska AHECs and their Host Organizations

- 1) Yukon Kuskokwim AHEC (hosted by Yukon Kuskokwim Health Corporation)
- 2) Interior Alaska AHEC (hosted by Fairbanks Memorial Hospital)
- 3) South Central AHEC (hosted by Providence Health & Services Alaska)
- 4) Southeast Alaska AHEC (hosted by SouthEast Alaska Regional Health Consortium (SEARHC))
- 5) Northwest AHEC (hosted by Ilisagvik College)

The AHEC Program Office and its Centers convene regularly to share ideas and brainstorm new activities or new approaches to current activities. Each AHEC Center serves a distinct geographic area with different resources and needs. With shared funding and a common goal, the Centers support each other's learning, growth, and capacity.

## Alaska AHEC Steering Committee

The Alaska AHEC has a Steering Committee whose role is to advise program activities and advocate for program sustainability. Each member plays a vital role in ensuring the Alaska AHEC remains a shared, statewide resource and meets the needs of our diverse healthcare industry.

Currently, the Steering Committee is undergoing a membership transformation to better align with the recent federal AHEC Program activity requirements. Below is an outline of the membership structure that will guide the Alaska AHEC through 2017.

- AHEC Host Organizations
- Alaska Primary Care Association
- Alaska State Hospital & Nursing Home Association
- Denali Commission
- Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority
- University of Alaska
- Department of Health and Social Services
- Department of Education or a rural school district representative
- Department of Labor or a member of the Alaska Workforce Investment Board
- Rural healthcare provider
- Rural hospital or community health center administrator



## Letter from the Associate Director

Greetings,

It is with great pleasure that I provide you with the first-ever Alaska AHEC Annual Activity Report. This initiative was set-forth by my predecessor and passionate rural health advocate, Beth Landon. The Alaska AHEC team is proud to have worked towards its completion over the past 12 months.

Unless otherwise stated, this report summarizes program activities between July 1, 2010 – June 30, 2011, the reporting period defined by the national AHEC program.

It has been an eventful year for the Alaska Area Health Education Center (AHEC) Program. Rural healthcare continues to face a multitude of challenges on national and statewide fronts, including decreased budgets, increased activity mandates, and shifting focus areas.

And, while the AHEC program has not escaped these hardships, we responded by evaluating our program activities to determine which were still worthy of the allocation of diminishing resources. This report highlights these activities and demonstrates the importance of having a thriving and operational AHEC program in Alaska.

I would like to dedicate this report to the University of Alaska Anchorage and our five Host Organizations who continue to support Alaska's AHEC program: Yukon Kuskokwim Health Corporation, Fairbanks Memorial Hospital, Providence Health & Services Alaska, SouthEast Alaska Regional Health Consortium and Iisagvik College. Thank you for your advocacy, investment, and partnership.

-Katy Branch



**Jackie Pflaum, Director -**

Jackie is Associate Vice Provost of the Office of Health Planning. She provides oversight and leadership of the Alaska AHEC Program, as well as oversight to the UAA School of Nursing's RRANN and Nursing Workforce Diversity programs.  
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**Katy Branch, Associate**

**Director -** Katy oversees the daily operations of the Alaska AHEC, conducts strategic planning, is liaison to host organizations and Center Directors, and is responsible for advocacy and partnerships in state, regional, and national settings.  
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kebranch@uaa.alaska.edu



**Janice Troyer, AHEC**

**Program Manager -** Janice coordinates AHEC student rotations with Centers, oversees the AHEC Pipeline Cache database, and manages the Health Careers in Alaska and Clearinghouse for Clinical Rotations websites.  
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jktroyer@uaa.alaska.edu

## Alaska AHEC Staff



**Laura McCrillis, Fiscal**

**Program Assistant -** Laura manages the Alaska AHEC's fiscal responsibilities, including subawards with Centers, contracts, purchase orders, and travel.  
(907) 786-6579  
lfmccrillis@uaa.alaska.edu

**TBD, Education Network Manager -** This position develops and facilitates CE/CME opportunities for health providers in rural and underserved areas, assesses health workforce education/training needs, and develops partnerships to bridge gaps. The Education Network Manager also promotes the sustainable integration and expansion of clinical simulation usage across Alaska.  
(907) 786-6589



# Alaska AHEC Centers

## Northwest AHEC

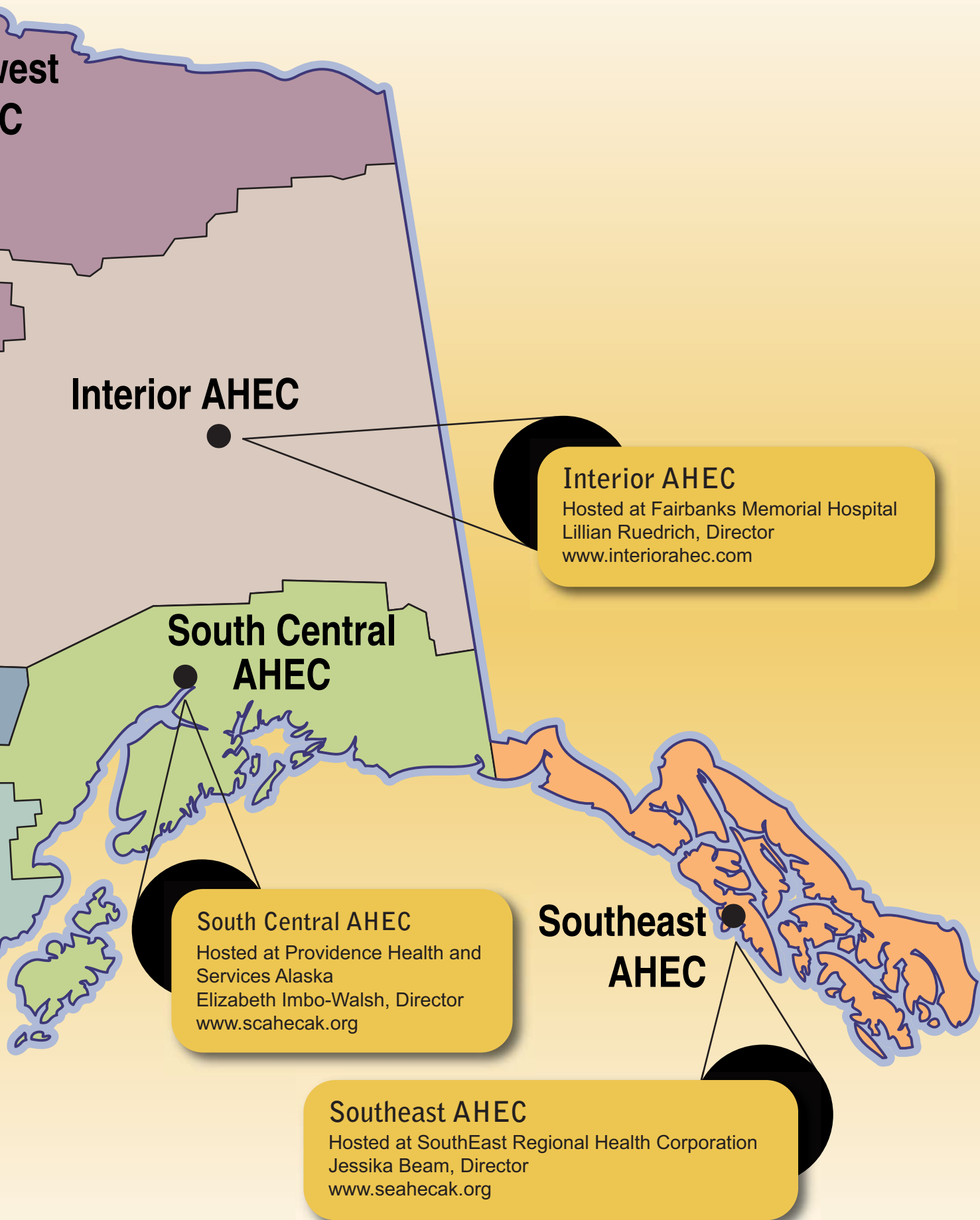
Hosted at Ilisagvik College  
Gloria Burnett, Director  
[www.nwahecak.org](http://www.nwahecak.org)



## Yukon Kuskokwim AHEC

## Yukon Kuskokwim AHEC

Hosted at Yukon Kuskokwim Health Corporation  
Laurinda O'Brien, Director  
[www.ykhc.org/607.cfm](http://www.ykhc.org/607.cfm)



**Interior AHEC**

**Interior AHEC**

Hosted at Fairbanks Memorial Hospital  
Lillian Ruedrich, Director  
[www.interiorahec.com](http://www.interiorahec.com)

**South Central AHEC**

**South Central AHEC**

Hosted at Providence Health and Services Alaska  
Elizabeth Imbo-Walsh, Director  
[www.scahecak.org](http://www.scahecak.org)

**Southeast AHEC**

**Southeast AHEC**

Hosted at SouthEast Regional Health Corporation  
Jessika Beam, Director  
[www.seahecak.org](http://www.seahecak.org)

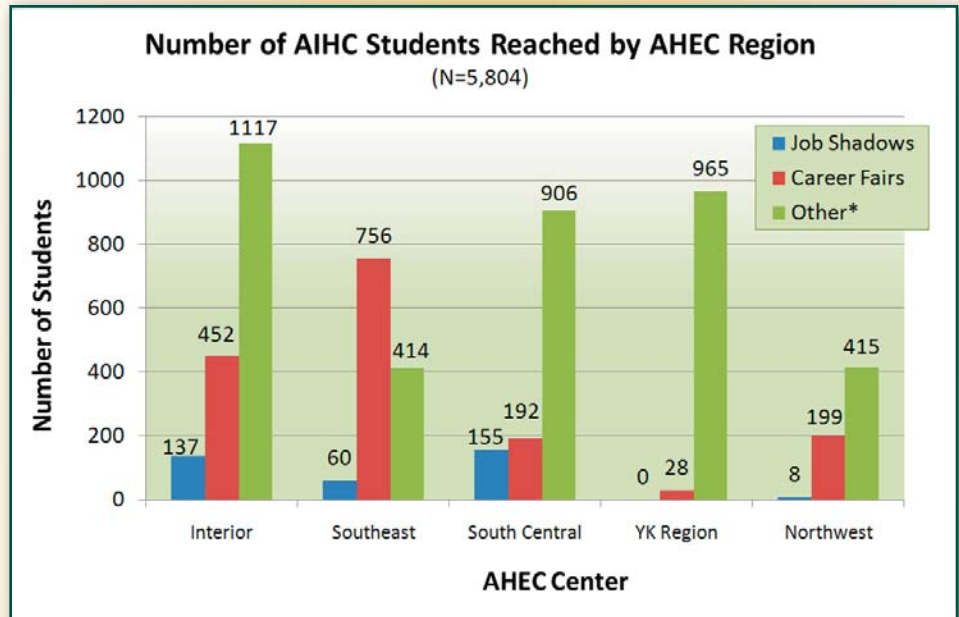


# Alaskans into Health Careers

Staff at each regional AHEC is dedicated to recruiting Alaskans into Health Careers (AIHC) – a primary activity area for our Program. They expose Alaskans of all ages to the wide range of health careers, emphasizing primary care occupations. Examples of these activities include:

- Providing tours and job shadowing experiences
- Arranging health professionals as guest speakers in classrooms, at community events, and with youth organizations
- Coordinating intensive health programs, such as the Village Health Opportunities Program (VHOP) in Southeast and Allied Health Camps in Barrow, and organizing and sponsoring Health Occupations Students of America (HOSA) Chapters throughout the state
- Working with teachers, counselors, and principals to bring health career information into the schools, such as the Teacher Industry Externship (TIE) Program
- Encouraging adults re-entering the workforce or changing careers to consider healthcare

*"It was a good presentation. Learned a lot about the heart and different types of jobs in the health career. And I also liked how we addressed our community health problems because it got me thinking about ways to help the community."*



\*Tours, Pre-med Summits, Presentations, In-a-box Activities

## Health Occupation Students of America

**(HOSA)** is a national student organization endorsed by the US Department of Education and the Health Science Technology Education Division of the Association for Career and Technical Education. HOSA's two-fold mission is to promote career opportunities in the healthcare industry and to enhance the delivery of quality healthcare to all people. The Alaska program has grown from 14 participants in 2005 to 201 participants in 2010. Alaska HOSA has chapters in Fairbanks, Ketchikan, Juneau, Wasilla, and Anchorage.

## The Teacher Industry Externship (TIE)

**Program**, hosted by Alaska's regional AHECs, is part of a larger Department of Labor and Workforce Development program that provides professional learning opportunities for educators to pass along to their students. AHECs sponsor healthcare-related externships for educators working with students in grades 7-12. Externships are two weeks in length and occur in May or June. During the past three years, the Alaska AHEC Program sponsored a total of 20 teachers (nine in 2010).



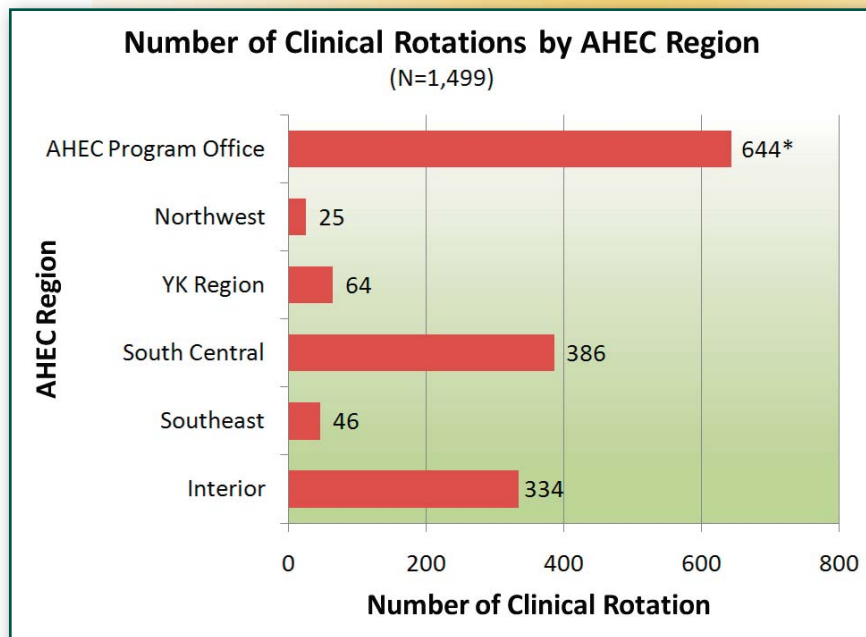
# Clinical Rotations

The AHEC Program Office works in conjunction with Regional Centers to arrange required clinical experiences at rural and underserved sites for health professions students. Students come from a variety of disciplines, including University of Alaska students and students from across the United States. Alaska AHEC strives to target priority professions as identified by the Alaska Workforce Investment Board and the recently published Alaska Health Workforce Plan.

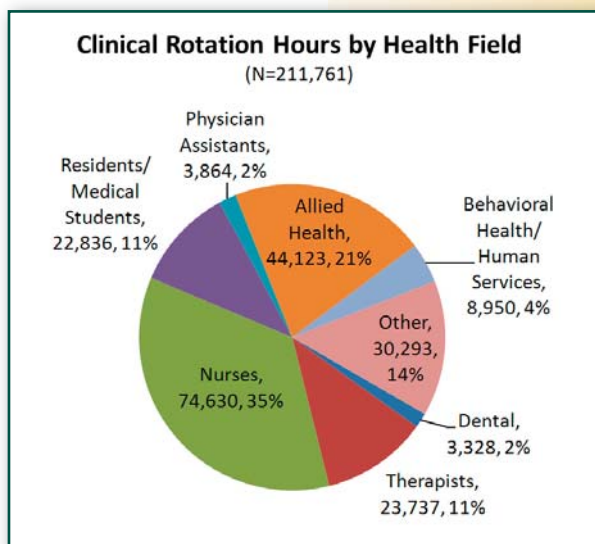
Clinical rotations serve as both an intensive educational experience, where students get hands-on training and mentoring from a health professional in their selected field, and an effective recruitment strategy, where health facilities can observe the student at work and determine whether employment upon graduation is a good fit.

*"I think that UAA should encourage all of its medical programs to visit rural areas of Alaska to do even short clinical experiences. I was so influenced by my experience that I changed my entire career direction in nursing. I originally wanted to do Neonatal Intensive Care. Now, I am passionate about public health. Rural public health is a direction and an opportunity I never knew existed until I visited Bethel."*

-UAA Baccalaureate Program senior after her summer 2010 clinical experience in Bethel



\*These include all UAA nursing underserved rotations



# Continuing Education

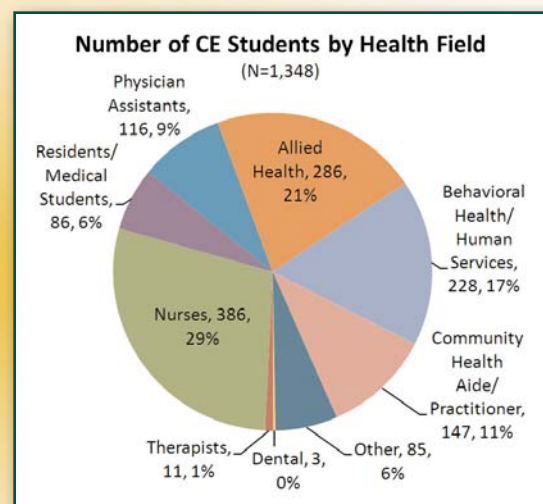
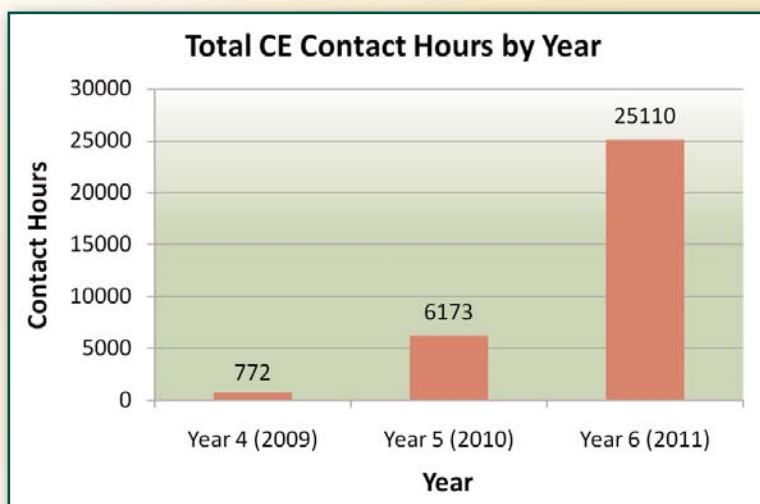
The Alaska AHEC Program supports, coordinates, and disseminates information about continuing education (CE/CME) opportunities targeting healthcare professionals working in rural areas or with underserved populations. The goal of this program focus area is to increase workforce retention. In order to closely monitor the CE/CME needs of providers in Alaska, the AHEC conducts periodic needs assessments in partnership with statewide trade associations. Most recently, an assessment was conducted in August 2011. Ongoing projects in this goal area include implementation of the Alaska CACHE: A Clearinghouse for Alaska's Continuing Health Education, sponsorship of ongoing Alaska-based conferences, and development of a rural-focused Clinical Coaching curriculum.

The Alaska CACHE ([www.akcache.org](http://www.akcache.org)) is a web-based learning management system designed to increase access to ongoing CE/CME for staff working in small, rural health facilities. The goals of the project are to streamline and consolidate CE/CME information and provide an information dissemination pipeline for providers in rural communities. The Alaska CACHE has been collaboratively evolved with industry partners and built on the backbone of the Trust Training Cooperative's Learning Management System, making it designed specifically for Alaska's health workforce. Both systems work cooperatively and serve distinct audiences. Phase I was completed by June 30, 2011. Phase II is expected to be completed by June 30, 2012. The functionalities of the system will include the ability to: search for current CE/CME events by profession, topic, or CE host; manage and track CE/CME completed by individuals or employees; post upcoming events; track attendance and registration; and download reports.

*"This year's CE Week for Interior community health aides was the best ever! The focus on pediatric information and skill-building helped to meet a critical need, and everyone finished the week full of ideas and enthusiasm."*

The Alaska AHEC supported CE/CME delivery by sponsoring several conferences, including the Alaska Diabetes Conference, the Alaska Academy of Family Physicians 25th Annual Scientific Congress, the Alaska Nurse's Association and Nurse Practitioners conferences, Breast Cancer Symposium for Medical Professionals and the annual National Association of Social Workers conference. Other CE events included sponsorship of a CE week for Community Health Aides in the Interior and coordination of the Northwest Geriatric Education Telehealth Series.

In consultation with the Alaska Coalition of Educators and the Vermont Nurses in Partnership, the Alaska AHEC developed a distance-based curriculum aimed at nurturing more rural preceptors/clinical coaches across healthcare disciplines. The Alaska AHEC will be using some of this year's AHEC funds to implement and test the new modules with the intent that the University of Alaska Southeast will manage delivery in the future.





# The AHEC Program is Evolving ...

Effective in fiscal year 2012, the Health Resources and Services Administration's Bureau of Health Professions mandated that AHECs incorporate new required activities into their programs. AHECs are expected to continue the current activities described heretofore: engaging Alaskans into Health Careers, training health professions students by providing rural clinical rotations, and retaining our health workforce through CE/CME sponsorships. In addition, Alaska AHECs will incorporate activities that:

- Emphasize public health careers
- Involve interdisciplinary training
- Develop and implement strategies in coordination with applicable one-stop delivery systems identified in the Workforce Investment Act of 1998
- Evaluate AHEC program effectiveness and impact

These new initiatives are outlined below.

**Public health careers** will be a new emphasis in our sponsored intensive camps, such as the Della Keats Program and the Village Health Opportunities Program (VHOP). Additionally, HOSA will incorporate public health-specific programming in activities throughout the year. The Interior AHEC will pilot a Youth Health Service Corps program with Upward Bound students of the Effie Kokrine Charter School in Fairbanks based on a curriculum adopted from the Connecticut AHEC. The YK AHEC will expand their popular Speaker's Bureau to include speakers focused on Environmental Health, Public Health Nursing, Nicotine Control, Diabetes Prevention, and Healthy Hearts. Students will learn about issues surrounding these topics and the health careers involved. Alaska AHEC is also partnering with the Career and Technical Education Task Force to compile and evaluate an inventory of pathways programs in Alaska in an effort to build a streamlined health program pipeline with multiple entry and exit points.

**Interdisciplinary training** involving physicians, physician assistants, nurse practitioners, nurse midwives, dentists, psychologists, pharmacists, optometrists, community health workers, and public and allied health professionals will become a focus of CE/CME. Some examples of planned activities include a course entitled "Communicating with Excellence and Diversity," CE/CME opportunities for nutritionists/dietitians and allied health professions serving low-income families in partnership with the Woman Infant Child (WIC) Program and the Geriatric Telehealth Series that offers evidence-based practice to multiple disciplines on geriatric topics. In addition, the Education Network Manager of the Alaska AHEC Program office will lead two Clinical Simulation Coalitions – one in the Interior region and the other in Southeast – to develop a regional training program.

**Workforce Investment Act** delivery systems partner with South Central AHEC and the Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC) to provide low-income Alaska Natives with intensive exposure to careers in healthcare, focusing on nursing and medical coding/billing (Alaska Workforce Investment Board priority areas). Additionally, the Program Office Associate Director continues to play a role in the Alaska Health Workforce Coalition implementing the Alaska Health Workforce Plan; wherein the AHEC plays a pivotal role across identified strategies.

**Evaluation** of the Alaska AHEC program and its activities continues to play a critical role in determining the successes and areas that can be improved. This goal area is now an emphasis for HRSA as well. This past year, the Alaska AHEC worked with the regional centers to develop standardized evaluation tools for all AHEC activities. The Alaska AHEC continues to strategize over the best methods to distribute these tools and collect the information for the wide variety of activities that are taking place. The Alaska Pipeline Cache, a web-based database used by the Program Office and regional AHECs to collect information on program activities and produce required federal and other reports, continues to evolve to better meet the needs of both HRSA and other reporting needs. In this vein, the Program Office is leading a collaborative effort with the Utah and Connecticut AHECs (both who have adopted Alaska's Pipeline Cache) to adapt the database to better meet existing program needs and capture new federal reporting requirements.

## Alaska AHEC Program Impacts

Ultimately, the Alaska AHEC strives to build, strengthen, and diversify the healthcare workforce. The main goals are to: 1) encourage more K-12 students and adults to choose a career in healthcare; 2) help students studying in a health program receive exposure to, and targeted training in, rural communities or with underserved populations; and 3) aid facilities in retaining their current staff by providing access to high quality, evidence-based continuing education.

To gauge the effectiveness of the AHEC program activities to date, the Program Office embarked on a first-ever, long-term student tracking project to determine where clinical rotations students from years 2008-2010 are now.

1) 2,210 clinical rotation student names and dates of birth were sent to the University of Alaska statewide and National Student Clearinghouse.

2) As of March 2011, 902 (41%) students had earned degrees. *Many remaining students are assumed to be working towards degrees. Degrees were in the following areas:*

- 89% in a health related field
- 6% in a science related field
- 5% were either unknown or a non-science field

3) 664 (30%) students were from University of Alaska programs. 618 were Alaska residents (as of 2009).

- 487 were employed in the 3rd Quarter of 2010
- 81% were in jobs categorized as “healthcare” or “social assistance.” Of these, 12.5% worked in rural areas in Alaska. *(Note: the data did not differentiate those working with underserved populations in urban areas, so they were not counted.)*





**The AHEC Program Office** manages several applied health workforce research projects on an annual or biennial basis. These studies are conducted in partnership with Alaska's health industry and add to the rich data set necessary to ensure an adequate workforce exists and will continue to exist in order to meet the healthcare needs of Alaskans. Below are brief descriptions of two research projects ongoing in FY 2012.

## Alaska Vacancy Study

Alaska is confronted by a “perfect storm” of health professional shortages. The state has long suffered from a deficient “supply side” characterized by insufficient numbers of key health workers whose recruitment, retention, and training have been impeded by Alaska's remoteness, harsh climate, rural isolation, low population density, and scarce training resources. Now exacerbating this already difficult situation is a burgeoning “demand side” for increased health services for a steadily growing and aging population.

UAA's Alaska Center for Rural Health-AHEC (ACRH/AHEC) has conducted several health workforce vacancy studies over the past decade, each growing in size and scope of work. A 2007 study assessed vacancies across 126 health occupations (including allied health, mental/behavioral health and physical health), and across a large spectrum of health settings. A similar vacancy study was repeated in 2009, and another is planned for Spring 2012. In partnership with several health organizations, including the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority, UAA's Office of Health Programs Development, UAA's School of Nursing, UAA's Allied Health Sciences, the State Office of Rural Health, the Alaska Primary Care Association, and the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, ACRH/AHEC will repeat the Alaska Health Workforce Vacancy Study to not only gain an understanding of the current health workforce landscape, but also attempt to link back and identify trends from the 2007 and 2009 studies.

The goals of the 2012 Alaska Health Workforce Vacancy Study are to: assess the current vacancy rates in specific healthcare occupations (approximately 100); identify factors impacting vacancies, including location; appraise facility setting and cost; and draw trends between the current study and past studies (2007 and 2009).



## Community APGAR Questionnaire

The Alaska AHEC is managing a dynamic, cross-state physician recruitment and retention study called the Community APGAR Questionnaire (CAQ). Partners in this effort include the State Office of Rural Health, UAA's WWAMI Medical Program, the Alaska Family Practice Residency, and the Alaska State Hospital & Nursing Home Association. The study was originally designed by Boise State University and is currently being implemented in North Dakota, Wyoming, and Maine. The CAQ examines 50 variables linked to physician recruitment and retention from a broad community perspective and delivers targeted data back to healthcare facilities. The study is phased over two years and will assess 14 of Alaska's most rural, critical access hospitals and the communities where they reside.





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