



For Immediate Release

February 23, 2011

Media Contact:

Fiona Brosnan, Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium

907-729-1967, fbrosnan@anthc.org

Gun storage units help prevent firearm injury in Alaska

Firearm injuries continue to rank as the second leading cause of death among youth. Of all suicide deaths among Alaska Natives, 61 percent involved the use of a firearm.

For the past seven years the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium has been engaged in a Safe Firearm Storage Project with the Bristol Bay Area Health Corporation (BBAHC) and the Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation (YKHC). With a goal of promoting “safe storage” and overall family safety, the project generated a good deal of community interest and received full support from regional tribal leadership as well as village councils. Both BBAHC and YKHC have a very active injury prevention program and their injury prevention staff was well known in the villages.

Recent data from a study conducted by the Harborview Medical Center’s Injury Prevention team and the Research Center at the University of Washington demonstrate that households with locked-away firearms are associated with a 75 percent reduction in the risk of unintentional gun injury incidents among teens.

ANTHC and regional injury prevention programs made it a priority to conduct a similar injury prevention study in rural Alaska. The purpose was to better understand how people store guns and whether or not gun lockers would be used by village residents, if they were made available and installed in homes.

By collaborating on gun storage research with Dr. David Grossman at Harborview, the organizations developed a research project to determine the acceptance of gun lockers, as opposed to the use of trigger locks which were free and readily available, but required a key for each lock.

Using locally hired village liaisons and interpreters, the research team went house-to-house to determine the need and find out the percentage of guns that were locked up at the time of the survey. Ten communities were surveyed and of those, six communities were randomly selected to participate in the project.

Eligibility for the project was determined by the presence of guns in the home and no existing safe, lockable place to store guns. A top priority was to make sure the gun safes were installed properly, so the research team worked closely with tribal councils to identify and hire local workers who could do just that as well as provide on-site education on gun safety and storage, using prepared materials.

The project installed over 400 gun storage units in the two regions. The results of the research showed that a very high percentage of people gun lockers were using them properly and these positive results



are generating even more enthusiasm for the program and the desire to expand it in other areas of rural Alaska.

One area that has felt these positive results is Dillingham, Alaska. In this area people are proactively promoting firearm safety among kids. Several organizations are getting involved and teaming up with the local injury prevention program to improve gun storage. The Bristol Bay Area Housing Authority has been working closely with Ward Jones, BBAHC IP Specialist and the result has been a re-design of tribally built housing to accommodate a gun locker.

In the six houses being constructed in a housing district in the small town of Aleknagik, residents looked forward to many improvements. Aside from finished wood flooring, a wood stove and a dishwasher, the new house will have a built in gun safe. These are big upgrades for the Tugatuk family, who is moving into one unit.

The Tugatuk family is not alone. Organizations like the Bristol Bay Area Housing Authority (BBHA) cannot build houses fast enough and have future plans to accommodate the demand. But as blueprints are drawn, safety and the needs and concerns of the people come first. The program is revolutionizing firearm safety from the beginning of a home's construction.

"We did a lot of research on gun storage," said Ward Jones of BBAHC. "Gun safes work in preventing unintentional shootings and suicides, especially among youth."

Given the important role of firearms in the subsistence lifestyle of the population, it's widely agreed that limiting youth's access to guns may be the most feasible environmental strategy to reduce firearm related incidents and deaths. Both BBHA and BBAHC are hoping their teamwork on the new houses will hold true to this research.

BBAHC paid for the gun safes, with help from ANTHC's Injury Prevention program's special project funds and Indian Health Services suicide prevention funding. BBHA took on the fiscal responsibility of delivering and installing the safes in homes.

"The safes were big enough to house what is the normal amount of firearms for a family in our area," Jones said. "These are 12/24 gun safes — if you have more than 12, you can reconfigure the safe." "They're also fire-resistant," Andy Anderson of BBHA added, "and include shelving to lock up other items like medications."

Jones believes this is the first public housing built with installed gun storage in the United States, if not the world. The National Rifle Association was unaware of any other projects of this kind in the U.S.

Helen Stafford, ANTHC Injury Prevention Coordinator, who has been involved in the project since the outset, said, "I wish we had more money and could go into more regions because this project has been so well received."



Alaska Native
Tribal Health Consortium

Administration · 4000 Ambassador Drive · Anchorage, Alaska 99508 · Phone: (907) 729-1900 · Fax: (907) 729-1901 · www.anthc.org

About the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium

The Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium is a not-for-profit tribal health organization managed by Alaska Native tribal governments and their regional health organizations. We provide statewide services in specialty medical care; construction of water, sanitation and health facilities; community health and research; information technology and professional recruiting. For more information, please visit www.anthc.org.

About the Bristol Bay Area Health Corporation

The Bristol Bay Area Health Corporation is a non-profit tribal health care organization established in 1973 that serves 34 Tribes in Southwest Alaska. For more information, please visit <http://www.bbahc.org>.