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Media Contact: Fiona Brosnan, ANTHC  
907-729-1967; [fbrosnan@anthc.org](mailto:fbrosnan@anthc.org)

## **Alaska Dental Health Aide manager wins national award**

Kathy Balasko, RDH, MS, a manager with the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium's (ANTHC) Dental Health Aide Therapist (DHAT) program in Bethel, was recently awarded the Indian Health Service (IHS) Senior Hygiene Clinical Service Award for Excellence. Balasko was presented the award at the IHS Dental Update in Albuquerque, N.M.

"Kathy is an invaluable resource for our dental disease prevention and oral health promotion efforts in Alaska," said Mary Williard, DHAT Training Director for ANTHC. "As a clinician, an educator, and program manager, Kathy has given remarkable energy and commitment to improving oral healthcare access in rural Alaska."

Senior dental hygienists in the IHS program perform a variety of roles, such as clinician, educator/health promoter, program administrator/manager, and patient advocate. The Award for Excellence was created to recognize outstanding contributions and service in the field of dental hygiene.

"In a unique environment which has many barriers to care, Kathy efficiently oversaw the installation of a dental health aide therapist training clinic in Bethel," said Sarah Shoffstall, DENTEX Clinical Site Director. "Her clinical skills, organization and dedication to improving the oral health of Alaska Natives make her the perfect candidate for this award."

Balasko began her IHS career in Alaska in September 2004. She started at the Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation (YKHC) in Bethel, where she worked as a clinician, educator and manager of YKHC's Primary Dental Health Aide (PDHA) Program. In 2007, Kathy was recruited to oversee the installation of a temporary clinic in Bethel that would house the new DHAT training program. In 2008, the Bethel clinic moved to its permanent location, the Yuut Elitnaurviat Dental Training Clinic.

Balasko has also served as the Chair of the Dental Academic Review Committee of the Community Health Aide Certification Board, the event coordinator for the Annual Alaska Dental Chief, Dental Prevention Coordinator and Dental Assistant Meetings, and has traveled around Alaska teaching the hygiene curriculum of the Expanded Function Dental Health Aide and the Primary Dental Health Aide courses.

Also recognized at the IHS Dental Update was Stephanie Woods, one of the first graduates of the DHAT program that trained in New Zealand and now practices for the Maniilaq Association in Northwest Alaska. She was awarded the People's Choice Award for her table clinic on the Alaska DHAT program that highlighted the curriculum, certification process and practice of a DHAT.

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**About the Indian Health Service Dental Program:**

The service mission of the IHS Dental Program, in partnership with American Indian and Alaska Native people, is to raise the oral health of American Indians and Alaska Natives to the highest possible level. To carry out the mission, the IHS provides preventive and curative oral health services. Approximately 150 dental hygienists work in the IHS dental programs providing both clinical and community service.

**About the ANTHC Dental Health Aide Therapist Program:**

The Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium created the DHAT program in 2000 in response to rural Alaska's extraordinary unmet need for oral health services. Alaskan children and families have some of the highest levels of oral disease in the country. Due to the lack of dentist in rural Alaska, many residents receive limited or no regular oral health care, often leading to pain and suffering. . ANTHC and other tribal organizations combined two proven models – the community health aide program that has extended care to rural Alaskans for decades and the mid-level dental therapist model used in over 50 countries in the world.