

Rural Alaska's Dental Access Problem



For the residents of nearly 200 small isolated communities in rural Alaska, access to dental care services is a serious problem.

Consider these facts:

- About 85,000 Alaska Natives live in small villages of 300-400 people, accessible only by small aircraft, boat, or snow-machine.
- Alaska Natives suffer rates of dental caries (decay) at 2.5 times the United States national rates. More than one-third of rural Alaska school children have missed school because of dental pain.
- By the time Alaska Natives reach adulthood, many have already experienced the devastating consequences of a lack of dental care.
- Dentists employed by Alaska Native tribal health agencies generally can visit each community only once a year for a week or two at a time. Recruitment and retention of

rural dentists is an ongoing challenge, as most dental school graduates choose private practice, not public health dentistry.

- Private sector dentists rarely live or travel in rural Alaska to provide services because of high travel costs and lack of patient insurance.

“Unless you have worked and lived in the Alaska bush, you cannot conceive of the level of need we confront on a daily basis, and the amount of resources that are required to provide even the most basic kinds of care.”

Mark Kelso, DDS

Norton Sound Health Corporation, Nome Alaska
