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New crisis center considered for Kotzebue

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A new crisis stabilization center is considered for Kotzebue to assist people experiencing a mental health crisis or extreme intoxication.

Maniilaq Association is spearheading the project, seeking \$2 million for the construction and operation of the 24/7 facility where staff would support and stabilize patients in a mental health crisis, help intoxicated people get sober and provide transitional residential care, according to the project description.

"In this part of Alaska and Northwest Alaska, we've always had big disparities in behavioral health and mental health. Those are evident in our deaths by suicide numbers (and) ... in the people who have substance use disorder or substance abuse problems," said Tim Gilbert, president and CEO of the Maniilaq Association, which provides health and behavioral health services. "We've had significant disparities, and they've just now bubbled up to a point where we need to have some solutions. This is just one of them in the behavioral health continuum of care that we hope that one day we will have here in our region."

Kotzebue does not have a detox or sleep-off center, and there is a line and limited hours to access behavioral services. Oftentimes, if a Kotzebue resident is thinking about committing suicide, or if a homeless person drinks too much and they are at risk of dying from exposure to the cold, the only option they have is to go to an emergency room at the hospital — an expensive, inefficient way to deal with those problems, Gilbert said. Maniilaq staff started looking for an alternative for people "to come, be safe, you know, get stabilized."

Patients coming to the crisis center would be initially assessed to determine what their needs are, Gilbert said. Those in need of behavioral health services will be able to speak to licensed counselors without having to go into a different program to sign up and waiting for weeks for an appointment.



(From left) Tim Gilbert, Maniilaq president/CEO; Ely Cyrus, NANA board chair; John Lincoln, NANA president/CEO; Margaret Hansen, NWABSD board of education president; Cathy Tilton, speaker of the house of representatives; Nathan Hadley Jr., NAB assembly president; Terri Walker, NWABSD superintendent; and Eva Kinneveauk, Maniilaq Association board chair. The Northwest Arctic Leadership Team visited Juneau in February, 2023, to speak with state officials about the needs of the Northwest Arctic region. Photo courtesy of NANA. -

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"That's really the key that you have a place you can go right now when you're either suicidal or your drinking has put you in harm's way and you can get the services like an assessment and then counseling," Gilbert said. "It's not just a sobering center where you can just come and sleep it off. It's really where you can start to get services that are hopefully meaningful to your problem."

To address mental health services disparities, several Alaska municipalities are now implementing a three-part Crisis Now model: a crisis call line, a mobile response team — and a crisis center where the person can get their needs assessed and supported, said Eric Boyer, senior program officer at Alaska Mental Health Trust that is working with Maniilaq on the project. The first step is to support the person's needs in up to 23 hours, but if that's not enough, crisis center patients can go into short-term residential beds from two to seven days, he said. With the Section 1115 Medicaid waiver in place, all parts of this crisis response can be covered by health insurance, he said.

Maniilaq officials are currently considering various funding sources for a new crisis center in Kotzebue, including funds from the state and private foundations, as well as their own reserves. In the longer term, the plan is to build a brand new facility, Gilbert said. In the meantime, officials are considering repurposing and expanding the modular structures now used for caring for COVID-19 patients.

The new crisis center — and the overall need for mental health resources, as well as for housing and education in Northwest Alaska were in the spotlight for state legislators in February. The Northwest Arctic Leadership Team — composed of the leaders and executives at Maniilaq Association, Northwest Arctic Borough, Northwest Arctic Borough School District and NANA — met with state officials in Juneau to talk about the region's needs and important projects.

"The Northwest Arctic Leadership Team is an important way our regional organizations carry out the Inupiat Ilitqusiak (Inupiat Values) of hard work, cooperation and responsibility to tribe," Elizabeth Niiqsik Ferguson, regional affairs manager at NANA and staff support to NWALT said. "Their sharing of our region's strengths and needs together as one really helps get things done."

The team educated the policymakers about the self-determination model that encourages decision-makers to consult tribes and tribal consortiums, as well as Alaska Native corporations, especially when working on projects or around land-related issues.

"We each have responsibilities that could be relevant," said Elizabeth Saagulik Hensley, vice president of external and government affairs at NANA. "It's not a request for funding but it's a policy priority."

Leaders also highlighted the Cape Blossom Port Site project, which is "expected to really help reduce the cost of living in the region" and "to help it be a place where people can and want to live and thrive and raise families," Hensley said. Now that Cape Blossom Road is fully funded, the City of Kotzebue is looking for over \$9 million for the deep-water port.

Alaska Technical Center family housing is also among this year's priority projects. The housing will be designed for residents of the Alaska villages who want to come to Kotzebue to receive training, but don't have a place to stay with their family, Hensley said.

While the Northwest Arctic School District provides a dormitory designed for individuals, there's not a family housing set up yet, which can make training prohibitive or unattainable for some residents.

"This housing project would allow them to come to training while continuing to fulfill family responsibilities," Hensley said.

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