

# North Slope Borough

Department of Health and Social Services

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**Muriel K. Brower, MPA, MPH, Director**

## Hands of Hope Activity

Health Department received a grant that is aimed at reducing health inequities; we received this grant in April of 2021. Health equity is important to understand as it is an all-encompassing topic with many different “inputs” that affect a person’s equity (equal opportunity) to be as healthy as possible.

Inputs include *social determinants of health* and *adverse childhood experiences*. Our environment, including housing situations, access to transportation and public walkways that encourage healthy physical activities, the level of safety in our communities is also another factor, in other words, these *determinants* affect our health. Social determinants of health also include our social support systems, levels of stress or discrimination, and our engagement in community activities such as Nalukataq or Kivgiq. A person’s economic stability (employment, income, debt, and economic opportunities), their educational experiences (language, access to quality education or vocational training), access to nutritious food and the issue of hunger, and finally, the level and quality of their healthcare system (provider availability, cultural competence of providers, and levels of health coverage), all affect our health. These determinants can be viewed as risk factors or protective factors. Health Department is making a conscious effort to focus on protective factors that impact health.

*Adverse childhood experiences* (ACES) impact us into our adult lives when left alone and unaddressed or resolved. ACES include growing up in homes where a child experiences physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, physical neglect, emotional neglect, and household dysfunctions such as having family members with mental illnesses, family members who are incarcerated, family members with substance abuse, households where mothers are treated violently, and when a family experiences divorce. Understanding these unavoidable circumstances takes courage and reflection as well as social support from family and friends. When not addressed, unhealthy behaviors as well as physical and mental health issues surface as the child becomes an adult. Lack of physical activity, smoking, alcoholism, drug use, missing work are behaviors; severe obesity, diabetes, depression, suicide attempts, sexually transmitted infections, heart disease, cancer, stroke, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and broken bones are the physical and mental health impacts.

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Social determinants of health and adverse childhood experiences are often not within our ability to control, they lead to many unwanted and hurtful experiences later in life. On the positive flip side of this is another set of uncontrollable experiences that support identity and health, our cultural identities and community activities that support one another.

Healthy ways to cope with these experiences are what support identity; this includes activities such as aqpiq pie making, berry picking, story telling, Eskimo dancing, cooking and serving all parts of the whale (to either community or to our own families). The activities within our culture are based on our lifestyle and are circular in time (one season ending leads to another beginning, the cycle continue).

Understanding our own identity and value is the base of understanding how it can positively impact our future. Hands of Hope is a base activity that supports identity and the activity recognizes our input towards community; the activity demonstrates how important we all are as people, individually and collectively.

Finally, our Inupiaq cultural values: **Spirituality, Compassion, Humility, Cooperation, Love and Respect for our Elders and One Another, Hunting Traditions, Knowledge and Language, Conflict Resolution, Respect for Nature, Family and Kinship, Sharing, and Humor** are all protective factors that increase self-efficacy and are building blocks of social support for one another. We share our catch (whales, tuttu, fish, etc.), have deep respect for our Elders, value our language, practice spirituality, and so on. Utilizing these values have kept us strong and resilient through worldwide pandemics such as the Spanish Flu and COVID-19. Utilizing these values are critical because they build and support strong and healthy collective identities each one of us are responsible for helping develop and foster for our families and communities. Modeling our values comes from activities such as Hands of Hope and the North Slope Borough Department of Health and Social Services thank you for your active support and participation! Quyanapqak!