

Community-Based Primary Care at Southcentral Foundation

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KEY POINTS:

- Substantial improvements in care delivery, population health, and community satisfaction resulted from the transition of a federally operated health system to one owned and operated by the Alaska Native population it serves.
- Southcentral Foundation uses the term “customer-owner,” rather than “patient,” to recognize and reinforce that Alaska Native and American Indian people own the health system, are valued stakeholders, and should be empowered partners in care.
- Southcentral Foundation’s Nuka System of Care emphasizes customer-owner participation in the development of a shared vision and mission to provide guidance, consistency, and a clear path to follow for all of those engaged delivering care.
- In addition to providing care in centrally located hospitals and clinics, delivery of care over great distances is handled through state-of-the-art telemedicine technology, clinical team travel, and community health aides.
- Nuka System of Care best practices heavily emphasize continuous improvement, utilization of data and measurement, integrated care teams, and the integration of traditional healing into primary care.

Southcentral Foundation is an Alaska Native-owned, nonprofit healthcare organization serving Alaska Native and American Indian people living in Anchorage, the nearby Matanuska-Susitna Valley and 55 rural villages over a 108,000 square mile service area. From the 1950s to the 1980s, healthcare for that population was primarily provided by the Indian Health Service (IHS), an agency of the U.S. Public Health Service. In the 1980s, the Southcentral Foundation began to deliver primary care and other healthcare services, initially under contract to the IHS. Over time, direct control, governance, and responsibility for healthcare was transitioned from the Federal government to the Southcentral Foundation, culminating in a transfer of ownership of the Alaska Native Medical Center’s primary care to the Foundation in 1998. Since that time, the Southcentral Foundation has evolved into one of the premier primary care-based delivery systems in the U.S.. Southcentral Foundation’s “Nuka System of Care” is the name of the approach used to work with the Alaska Native community to guide the design and delivery of care in order to achieve health and wellness for the population.

Dr. Galbreath introduced the Southcentral Foundation system, speaking on behalf of the 65,000 people in Alaska to whom they deliver primary care. *Nuka* is an Alaska Native word meaning something large and grand with connotations of family and friendship. The Nuka System of Care is the result of a customer-driven overhaul of what was previously a bureaucratic system controlled by the U.S. Indian Health Service. All corporate, division, work unit, and individual goals and objectives flow out of the vision and mission’s three “key points”: shared responsibility, commitment to quality, and family wellness.



Comprised of organizational strategies and processes that work together based on relationships and the Alaska Native culture, the system fosters an environment of creativity, innovation, and continuous quality improvement. Southcentral Foundation's Nuka System of Care has led to improvements in population health and delivery system performance including reduced family violence, a drop in both ER and hospital admissions, top-in-class performance benchmarked nationally and internationally in utilization and quality, lower employee turnover, and high customer and staff satisfaction. Alaska Native people have received national and international recognition for their work and have set high standards for performance excellence, community ownership and engagement, and overall impact on population health.

Following Dr. Galbreath's presentation, these concepts were explored further in a conversation with Andy Ellner, MD, MSC, Harvard Medical School Center for Primary Care, addressing the replicability of the Southcentral Foundation delivery model in other environments.

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