



Community Economic  
Development Strategy  
CEDS



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**2011 Five Year CEDS Regional Project - Action Initiative Template**

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**Title or Name of the Project:**

Southeast Alaska Telemedicine Expansion

**Motivation:**

Alaska has made significant strides in providing remote access to physical and mental health medical care through the use of telemedicine technology. The current system is working well for those communities that have access to the technology and the supportive medical expertise. However, many small and rural communities do not have access to this technology nor the local medical expertise. Rural Southeast Alaska experiences significant seasonal population fluctuations. While year-round population numbers may not support justification for this type of infrastructure development the seasonal populations provide a more compelling model. Rural communities often support large commercial fishing fleets, numerous seasonal residents, and substantial tourism. These communities can experience a seasonal population increase of 500% or more. Many of the seasonal residents and visitors are engaged in dangerous occupations and activities. Rural communities also have higher percentages of unmet mental health needs. In most such rural communities the current health system relies on local volunteers who have had minimal training in the provision of basic medical and emergency medical services. These individuals often have little or no access to medical consultation. This is especially true for mental health services. Expanding our system of telemedicine in Southeast Alaska can provide an effective and efficient medical response resource throughout the region. Volunteer emergency service providers do not currently have ready access to training opportunities. A comprehensive telemedicine system can support first responders and EMS volunteers in maintaining and expanding their expertise. The lack of locally based access to medical consultation often results in significant expense due to the need to transport patients. Or, the individuals often go without the needed intervention. This is especially true for mental and chemical health issues. Weather conditions often put emergency transportation services at great risk. This system would support effective triage and will reduce the number of unnecessary transports. The system will also provide much needed access to chemical and mental health resources.

**Objective:**

The primary objective of this initiative is to enhance the existing system of physical and mental health telemedicine services by providing broader coverage to include small and rural communities in Southeast. An additional goal is to provide for expanded training opportunities for first responder/EMS staff and volunteers. The system will result in improved first responder/EMS care provided, improved triage, and improved outcomes for patients.



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**Obstacles:**

Funding for this project is the largest obstacle. The telemedicine technology is currently proven and available in Southeast Alaska but the service is not available region wide. A secondary obstacle concerns the training of staff in these communities. Staff needs to be trained to operate and maintain the system and also to serve as first responders/EMS providers. A system will need to be developed to pay for services provided. The provision of mental health and chemical health services through telemedicine may require a targeted public awareness campaign.

**Outcomes/ Results:**

A comprehensive system of emergency and telemedicine services will be developed to address physical and mental health medical services throughout Southeast Alaska. Improved health outcomes will result. Expensive and dangerous emergency transportations will be reduced through more effective triage services. Local first responders and EMS personnel will have ready access to training opportunities and consultation.

**Leadership:**

Southeast Conference

**Action Plan and Implantation:**

1. Convene a meeting of current telemedicine providers.
2. Develop Legislative support.
3. Create a task force to develop options.
4. Seek funding for the project.

**What does it promote:**

Telemedicine enhancement addresses a vital need to improve the physical and mental health coverage throughout Southeast Alaska. This technology will provide important access to the internet resources for small and rural communities. The system will support expansion of the number of medical personnel both paid and unpaid.

**Performance Measures:**

To be determined.

**Funding:**

Expanding the telemedicine network to cover Southeast Alaska region-wide will require significant upfront funding. A system will need to be developed to assess user fees and ongoing support.