



Bethel Alaska is a rural community of around 6,000 people on the western coast of Alaska and is surrounded by Alaska Native villages. Bethel is situated within the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta (larger than the Mississippi River Delta). Bethel is accessed only by boat, plane and snow machines, with no roads connecting to a major highway system.

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The Yukon Kuskokwim Fitness Center has been my life preserver. From July 2018 through now I've lost 135 pounds and I couldn't have done it without the YK Fitness Center staff. The Center offers a place for people to come exercise, get healthy and just feel better about themselves.

- Dennis Raines, Yukon Kuskokwim, YK Fitness Center Member

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Dennis after losing 135 pounds

Providing access to wellbeing in an often inaccessible rural community

Challenge

The community of Bethel faces many unique challenges other rural communities do not face:

Higher rates of poverty. Poverty rate within Bethel is 13.7% (higher than the overall national average rate of 12.3%) and the poverty rate is even higher in many of the surrounding Alaska Native villages.¹

Higher rates of suicide, alcohol misuse and rape/sexual assault. The suicide rate in Alaska (25.3 per 100,000) is double the national average rate.² Alaska is the state with the third highest rate of alcohol-attributable mortality in the country.³ There are 2.5 times more rapes per 100,000 in Alaska than the rest of the United States.⁴

Highest drowning rate in the nation. Alaska has the highest drowning rate in the nation.⁵

Difficulty in recruiting qualified staff. Local businesses, such as the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta Regional Hospital, face challenges in recruiting qualified staff to relocate to Bethel from the lower 48 states.

Solution

Community groups worked to fund and develop an aquatics and fitness center through a tax payer approved sales tax increase. After decades of work, the Yukon Kuskokwim Regional Aquatic Health and Safety Center (YK Fitness Center) opened its doors in 2014 and shortly after opening, the community partnered with HealthFitness for management of the facility. In an effort to make the most meaningful impact, maximize exposure and increase access to residents, the YK Fitness Center and HealthFitness staff focused on expansion of services and partnered with many local business and community organizations.

Results

Barbara Moiser was on the Bethel Parks and Recreation committee before and after the YK Fitness Center was opened. She's witnessed firsthand the meaningful impact the YK Fitness Center is having on the community:

"Different companies have gotten memberships for their employees. Adults and children are getting stronger physically with more indoor recreation and more activities after school to stay out of trouble. Everybody gets a chance. I know it helps me."

More than 1,500 of Bethel area residents have become YK Fitness Center members. With more than two dozen group fitness classes and instructional swim programs offered each week, members have a variety of options to choose from.

Services now include:

- Full aquatics program
- Swim instructor training
- Life guard training and certification
- Sponsored open-swim nights
- Group exercise classes
- Instructional training (tumbling, martial arts and dance classes for adults and youth)
- Youth camps
- Pro shop
- Facility rentals

In addition to the large range of services, staff also offer prevention programming to target some of the increased risks the community is facing. Prevention programs include **Kids Don't Float** and **Smart Fit Girls**. *Kids Don't Float* is a statewide injury prevention program designed to target high drowning rates in the state. *Smart Fit Girls* empowers adolescent girls to lead a healthy and active lifestyle through funding from a grant the HealthFitness staff obtained.

About HealthFitness

HealthFitness, a Trustmark company, delivers a complete and personalized wellbeing solution that is designed to make people healthier and includes the best of fitness and recreation, wellness, injury prevention and an engaging platform. HealthFitness is URAC and NCQA accredited and a proven leader and partner for enhancing wellbeing programs and transforming lives for the better. Parent company Trustmark provides a full spectrum of employee benefits to improve wellbeing through better health and greater financial security. For more information on HealthFitness, visit www.healthfitness.com.

¹U.S. Census Bureau. *United States Census Bureau Quick Facts Bethel City, Alaska* (2019). Available at: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/bethelcityalaska/POP815217>.

²U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). *Suicide mortality by state: 2016*. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/sosmap/suicide-mortality/suicide.htm>.

³Alaska Department of Health and Social Services. *Health Impacts of Alcohol Misuse in Alaska* (2018). *State of Alaska Epidemiology Bulletin*, 20(2). Available at: <http://epibulletins.dhss.alaska.gov/Document/Display?DocumentId=1976>.

⁴Alaska Department of Health and Social Services. *Complete Health Indicator Report of Rape (HA2020 Leading Health Indicator: 12)* (2018). *Indicator-Based Information System for Public Health (AK-IBIS)*. Available at: http://ibis.dhss.alaska.gov/indicator/complete_profile/Rape.html.

⁵Alaska Department of Health and Social Services. *Drowning Deaths in Alaska* (2014). *State of Alaska Epidemiology Bulletin*. Available at: http://www.epi.alaska.gov/bulletins/docs/b2014_08.pdf.

