



# Southcentral Foundation's Nuka System of Care

scfnuka.com

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**Target population:** Alaska Native and American Indian people in Alaska's Cook Inlet region

**Mission:** Working with the Native Community to achieve wellness through health and related services.

## Context

Southcentral Foundation (SCF) is an Alaska Native customer-owned health care system responsible for providing health care and related services to approximately 65,000 Alaska Native and American Indian people in Alaska's Cook Inlet region. Prior to 1998, health care for Alaska Native people was provided by the United States Indian Health Services department; however in 1998, Alaska Native people chose to take full responsibility for their own health care, with SCF taking responsibility for primary care and related services.

Today, SCF has grown from fewer than 100 to over 2,200 employees, with an operating budget of over \$300 million U.S. SCF operates the Nuka System of Care, which is a customer-driven, relationship-based health care system. In the Nuka System, the Alaska Native and American Indian people SCF serves are not patients, but "customer-owners," working in relationship with providers to achieve overall wellness. Nuka has distinguished itself as one of the world's leading health care systems, and SCF regularly hosts visitors from around the world who come to learn about Nuka and seek help in reforming their own health care systems.



## Governance & management

SCF operates under the tribal authority of Cook Inlet Region, Inc., which appoints SCF's seven-member Board of Directors. The Board makes policy for SCF and exercises overall control and management of the organization's affairs. All members of SCF's Board of Directors are customer-owners, as is the President/CEO and over 60 percent of management/leadership.

## Funding

SCF has a diverse funding stream, with funding coming from a variety of sources including but not limited to: United States Indian Health Services, private insurance, Medicare, Medicaid, private and public grants, and other third-party payers.

## What this initiative is about

### Our history

When Alaska Native people chose to assume responsibility for their own health care, they chose not to continue the practices of the past. Although the government personnel who had been running the system previously were well-intentioned, the care provided was ineffective, did not address whole-person wellness, and was not culturally appropriate for the people being served. Alaska Native leaders and community members saw the need for change.

### Customer ownership model

Upon taking responsibility for primary care, SCF spent a year collecting feedback from the Native community and transformed the health care system based on what they wanted, establishing the Nuka System of Care. The system was completely overhauled to focus on two major elements: customer-ownership and relationships. SCF does not refer to the Alaska Native and American Indian people it serves as "patients;" this term sounds passive and does not reflect the level of engagement for which SCF strives. Rather, since the people SCF serves are both SCF's customers and the owners of the health care system, as well as of their personal health journeys, they are "customer-owners."

SCF strives to engage the entire Native community in the health care system. On the individual level, SCF recognizes that each person has more control over his or her own health outcomes than providers do, and that when providers build strong, long-term relationships with customer-owners, it helps providers understand customer-owners and the health issues they may be facing. It also builds trust, which allows providers to more effectively support customer-owners in achieving wellness.



SCF hosts the Annual Gathering, a free event that community members can attend to learn more about services available at SCF and enjoy live entertainment, with activities for children and Alaska Native art available for purchase. SCF also maintains close relationships with organizations in the community such as the Alaska Federation of Natives and the Alaska Native Health Board.

Another method of community engagement SCF uses is the Health Education department. Through this collaboration, events and services for customer-owners such as group classes, gatherings, workshops, special events, health fairs, individualized counseling, cooking classes, and educational demonstrations are provided.

## Impact

- SCF's efforts to engage customer-owners and the community have had positive impacts. Since establishing the Nuka System of Care, Emergency Department visits for customer-owners have decreased by 40 percent, and hospital stays by 36 percent.
- SCF is in the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile nationwide for health measures such as cervical cancer screening, diabetes control, and CVD control < 100mg/dL, and in the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile nationwide for many other measures.
- 97% of customer-owners are satisfied with the care provided by SCF, 96% agree they have a say in care decisions, and 94% agree that their culture and traditions are respected at SCF. SCF has also achieved 95 percent employee satisfaction.



## Insights (Key learnings)

- Through establishing and operating the Nuka System of Care, SCF has learned that listening to the community and building the health care system around what they want leads to a more engaged community that is more invested in their own health care.
- Continual engagement efforts and involving the people the system serves in decisions about how that system operates, improve health outcomes and customer satisfaction rates.
- By letting customer-owners take the lead in their own health care, and being unafraid to make bold, sweeping changes, a high-quality, sustainable system can be built and tailored to the needs of the community.
- The Village Services Management Team serves as an advisory committee and liaison between SCF and Alaska Native representatives from the 55 rural villages SCF serves.
- The Elder Council advises SCF on the Elder Program and other areas which impact Elder health.