



SOUTHEAST ALASKA COMMUNITY REPORT

Prepared for the
Southeast Alaska Elder
Advisory Committee

March 18, 2024

**Alaska Native Successful
Aging Study**

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This work would not have been possible without the contributions of our study participants and community leaders.

Thank you - Gunalchéesh (*Tlingit*) - Háw'aa (*Haida*)
- T'oyaxsut 'nüüsm (*Tsimshian*)

All study data belong to the Southeast Alaska community and can be accessed by e-mailing Jordan Lewis at elders.aging.well@gmail.com

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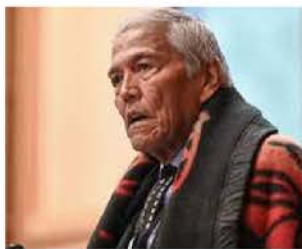
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Letter from Our Director

Jordan P. Lewis



Aang, aang! Qiliam iŕamnaa Anŕaŕim Ugutaa!! (my name means happy person) and my family are Aleut from Naknek and Cannon Beach, OR. I grew up surrounded by Elders, including both sets of my great grandparents and grandparents, so I grew up not fearing becoming older, but rather

embracing it as a stage of life where you continue to grow and thrive and find new meaning and purpose in life. When you compare this to how social media and the general public views aging, which is seen as a time of loss and decline and very medically focused, I felt the rest of the world, or at least the people I was going to interact with throughout my life, should learn about the benefits of growing older, the blessings and adventures, and that we should learn from people aging well today so we can get on the right path and hopefully be blessed to one day step into those shoes of an Elder and share our own stories.

I always knew I wanted to go to college and go as far as I could, which meant getting my doctoral degree, but not for the title of “doctor” but because I wanted to learn the skills to help our families and communities to support their Elders to age with dignity in the place they desired. My education taught me a lot about aging from a research, policy, and theoretical perspective and I also realized that Indigenous voices and experiences of aging, and their lessons on their journey, were not found anywhere. This 17-year project started out as a way to bring the voices and experiences of Alaska Native Elders in the Bristol Bay region to the literature so the scholars, students, and others could learn what aging is like from the perspective of the Elders, and not from a theory perspective or only the losses we experience as we grow older. I also feel aging is more than the medical and biological changes we experience. Alaska Native aging includes our family,

mental and physical health, the presence of religion and spirituality, traditional foods, and other aspects of life that are not included in most studies on aging. This project highlights what we have to look forward to as we age, which is a gift and should be honored and celebrated, and I want others to hear the stories, lessons learned, words of wisdom, and recommendations on how to “age in a good way.” This project started out with 26 visits (interviews) with Elders in Bristol Bay. With the support of the funder and the continued support and interest of our communities, it has continued for 17 years and will go on for as long as our Elders wish to share their stories.

What Have We Learned?

As of March 2024, we have conducted 162 interviews across 21 Alaska Native communities in five regions asking Alaska Native Elders what it means to them to age in a good way, what supports them to age where and how they want, and what they want younger people to know about aging in a good way. The Elders in our study represent most geographic and cultural regions of Alaska, and the main things that help them age in a good way include participating in their Native ways of life, protecting and supporting their emotional health, active engagement with their community, maintaining physical health as much as they are able, having some spiritual practices and/or attending religious services, and being generative, or passing down their knowledge, skills, and experiences to help younger generations learn to age well.

Southeast Alaska Similarities and Differences

Alaska Native successful aging is very personal and differs in meaning and experience for each person, but as we have expanded this project to communities across the state of Alaska, we have discovered themes, described above, that have applied everywhere including Southeast (SE) Alaska. For Elders of SE Alaska, the five main components of aging well included

spirituality, Native ways, engagement with community, emotional health, and physical health. In addition to these five components of successful aging, or aging well, the Elders in our project also shared the benefits and challenges of growing older in their community, which were not always discussed by other Elders in other regions. Southeast Alaska shared that gaining and earning respect, finding creative ways to adapt to aging, feeling gratitude for the support Elders received from family and community, as well as having a respected role as an Elder, were some of the most common benefits of aging in Southeast Alaska. On the flip side, some of the challenges of aging in their community included feeling lonely, physical health challenges, the impact of worrying about the youth during these changing times, and the Elders' desire to continue living in their own home and community but also needing to access services, including specialized care, in the cities.

Some of these benefits and challenges contributed to the Elders deciding to stay or leave their community to ensure they are able to age well, but also to age safely. Some of the most common reasons Elders make the difficult decision to leave their community is the lack of appropriate, or specialty, resources that would enable them to age in place. Other important reasons to leave were living closer to family who may have moved to a city for education or a job, and financial reasons; it can be expensive to continue living in rural Alaska. While there are challenges to aging well in rural Alaska, it is important to highlight the reasons Elders stay. Having the ability to live off the land, engage in subsistence activities, and have access to Native foods was one reason to stay in the community. Elders also shared that living in their own home provided them with a sense of safety, not only because they know their home, but the community also provided

them with a sense of safety and kept them close to their family and friends. We also learned from Elders in this project that giving and sharing was an important part of aging well, which included sharing their time, knowledge, and resources with others. This aspect of sharing was important to becoming an Elder and stepping into this important role for the family and community, and one other important part of sharing was related to recovery and sharing their own journey and being available for others. The Elders in this region also shared that in order to age in place, remain independent as much as they are able, and stay engaged, it is important to ask for help and access the available services and programs. Overall, the Elders in this region shared the importance of the five components of aging well (spirituality, Native ways, engagement with community, emotional health, and physical health) and accessing the services and programs you need to stay at home will enable you to age well and in a way that you wish and among the people who support you to be well and step into the role of Elder for your family and community.

What's Next?

Our team continues to be connected with other communities across the State who are interested in learning more about our study and coming to their community so they can learn how their Elders age in a good way. We have also been contacted by communities to explore other topics related to the health of their Elders and community, including long-term care services, traditional foods, and housing. Our team has made connections with a research team at UAF who will partner with us to conduct our study in the Yukon Kuskokwim region, and we have been connected with individuals in Kodiak who wish to bring our team to their region to learn about aging in a good way. While we have

plans to continue visiting with Elders across the State to learn about their experiences, we also want communities to know they can reach out to us if they wish to have their data used for other purposes. Our team is happy to work with you to help with grant writing, program development, or reading through your data to learn other things you may want to learn. We are honored and humbled to have the opportunity to sit down over tea and smoked fish to learn we can age in a good way and want to thank each Elder and community for this chance.

We Could Not Do This Work Without You

The research team would like to extend our thanks and gratitude to each of the members of our Elder Advisory Committee who have guided this project with passion, commitment, and a vision for this project that far exceeded our expectations. The EAC members include Jackie Dailey, Richard Jackson, Marcelo Quinto, Millie Schoonover, Sasha Soboleff, and Joe Williams Jr. Thank you for all you do on behalf of your Elders, family, and community. Your wisdom and guidance in this project were incredible and we are forever grateful for your time and mentorship. We also want to thank each of our community partners who trusted us to visit their community and give us the gift of time and knowledge from their respected and beloved Elders.

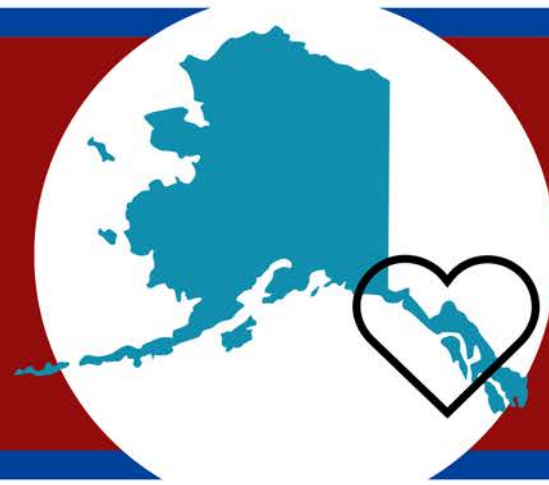
Qagaasakug,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "JP Lewis".

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Study Overview and Procedure



Purpose

The purpose of this report is to learn more about Elders' experiences of aging in a good way. This report is specific to the results of efforts by Southeast Alaska Native Elders.

Goals

Produce a set of recommendations informed by the experiences, knowledge, and needs expressed by Elders to be shared with the Southeast Alaska community as well as local, state, and national organizations in hopes of supporting grant applications and programming decisions.

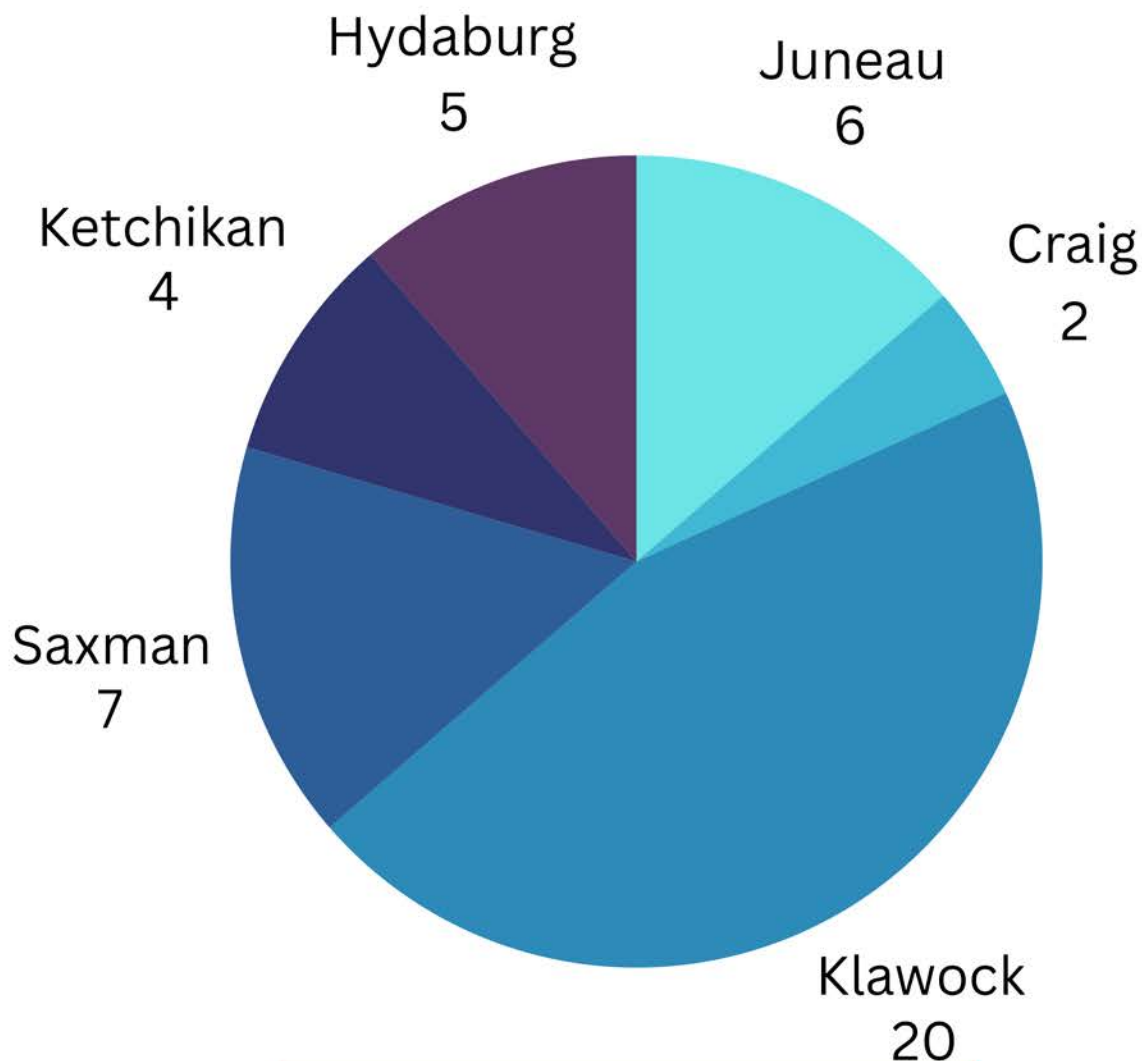
Procedures

In January and March of 2023, members from the Alaska Native Successful Aging Team had the honor of visiting Southeast Alaska and interviewing 44 community-nominated Elders from Juneau, Craig, Klawock, Saxman, Ketchikan, and Hydaburg.

This report is a summary of our findings

Southeast Alaska Community Representation

Interviews Per Community



Average age: 72.8 years
Age range: 50-93 years
Female: 24 Male: 20

Components of Aging Well

Spirituality - Sharing Native Ways - Engagement with
Community - Emotional Health - Physical Health



Spirituality

Spirituality is the umbrella under which other components of aging well happen

Elders explained that their spirituality guides the rest of their lives. Spirituality was gifted to the communities, including its Elders; Native people are born with it. Having spirituality allowed Elders to feel comfortable trusting their “gut feelings” and thinking in their Native way. Elders found it important to create a balance of spirituality and contemporary life. Spirituality was often linked with joy, emotional well-being, and physical health.

“The most important thing that I want to share is about their health, taking care of their emotions and their physical condition above everything and their spiritual condition above all. And then to give to people what they’ve learned.”

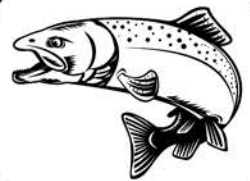
“We were born with spirituality; we have always had it. It is a way of life in my book.”

Sharing Native Ways

Living according to one's Native ways is essential to aging in a good way



Living
a subsistence lifestyle
that contributes to
resilience and longevity



**Gathering and
Eating**
traditional foods to
maintain physical
health and share
communally

*Elders keep Native and
traditional ways
vibrant through...*



Sharing
what they learned
from their Elders and
their life experiences
with their children
and grandchildren

*"We have what it takes to sustain ourselves
during the pandemic."*

Engagement with Community

Connecting with the community helped give Elders purpose and helped them stay active



Kinship Family

Elders gave and received support from their family and friends through visits, calls, and check-ins. These supports also helped with daily tasks and Elders shared knowledge and experience in return.



Community Programs

Elders stayed busy by participating in community programs, taking on official roles. They stayed socially active by participating in programs. Having space to gather is important and a challenge.

“I enjoy being active with numerous organizations. And I think that really makes the time fly by faster.”

“Have those supports in place that can help you, like your family, your friends, the community. The community can be a huge support if you go out.”

Emotional Health

Elders cared for their emotional health with support from and engagement with their family, friends, and communities

Elders discussed humor, gratitude, optimism, and balance as helpful to successful aging. Other Elders described having a mindset that helped them feel young. Depression and stress also caused some challenges with aging. One way that Elders said they could tell if another Elder was not doing well was if they seemed isolated or depressed. Some Elders overcame challenges with aging by having a mindset to allow aging to happen. Engagement with the community, through programs or spending time with family, helped their emotional health.

“Keep their minds focused so they don’t lose that willingness to keep going. If they don’t have that challenge, they don’t have that will”

“I just acknowledge that I have today. I don’t know if I’ve got tomorrow. So I’m happy where I’m at. And the stress is not a part of the quotient”

Physical Health

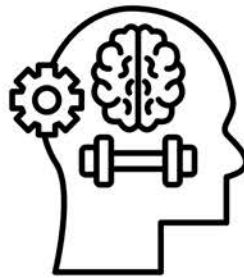
As their physical health changes with time, Elders find new and adaptive ways to prioritize their physical health

Elders care for themselves by



Doing as much of a task as they can

Persevering during challenging times



Exercising, eating well, and keeping an active mind

Enjoying where they are in life



Preventing illness & disability

Responding to sickness with doctor's help

“Walk at least to the post office or the store. Maybe just get out of your house every day. Show you have some life in you. Do not get discouraged that you got old. Do not let it be a burden. Make it be a badge you wear of honor that you got this far in life.”

Elders also emphasized the importance of caring for oneself when young, including avoiding substance use

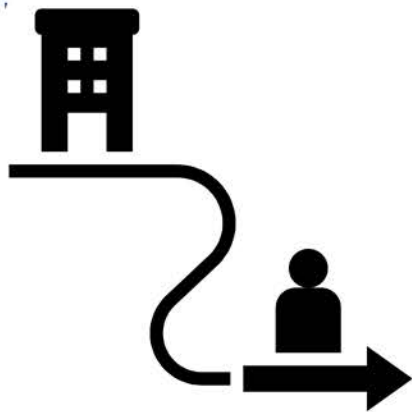
Aging in Southeast Alaska

Reasons Elders Leave Their Communities - Reasons Elders Stay in Their Communities - Challenges of Aging - Finding Balance While Aging in a Good Way



Reasons Elders Leave Their Communities

Community and resources are drivers for Elders leaving home despite a desire to stay



- Accessing specialty medical care
- Living closer to family
- Finances

“It got to the point where I couldn’t handle them (Elders in the family) on my own. They needed 24-hour care. And that would be the main reason that they moved, is to get 24-hour care.”

“And that’s not even just services, it’s just access to the economy in general. So if there isn’t anything where our caretakers like our kids would be able to survive, they’re not going to be able to move back to help take care of us”

Reasons Elders Stay in Their Communities

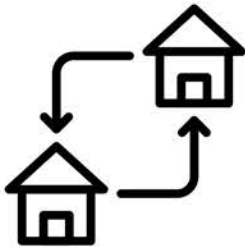


“I am just going to stay right here until you put me away because I have a great place. I have a view of the mountains, the waters. I’m really close to the city.”

“I enjoy it (living in my village). I am one of the most fortunate people you’ll meet. I’m not rich, but I have everything I want.”

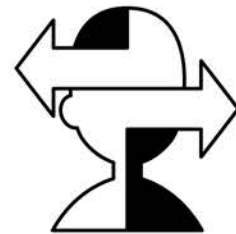
Challenges of Aging

Worry about younger generations as times are changing



Loss and loneliness

Preferring to live at home but needing access to city resources



Physical and mental health challenges

"[Y]ou can see a difference when you're visiting with an Elder when they light up when you come into the room...and you know know they've been alone for a while...There's a stark difference between how they were before versus how they are when they have company."

Finding Balance While Aging in a Good Way

Gaining and earning respect

Finding creative ways to adapt

Feeling gratitude for support received

Fulfilling role of a wisdom keeper

“This prospect of aging...on one hand, you can say it is a benefit and on the other, you can say it’s a real challenge. Because the challenge is the reality of our lives as you look at it.”

Additional Findings

Giving and Sharing - Becoming an Elder - Connecting with Youth - Southeast Alaska Programs and Services - Substance Use and Recovery - Local Support Networks



Giving & Sharing

Often considered an exchange, both the individual and the community benefit from these forms of giving and sharing



Time

- Visits with friends, family, and community members highly valued
- Time previously spent working and managing family can now be spent on teaching, particularly youth

Knowledge

- Skills like fishing, beadwork, chopping wood
- Sustaining culture and cultural practices

Resources

- Including finances, beadwork, transportation, and assistance when ill



“We are role models. We lead by example, not only to our family, our friends, but our community”

Becoming an Elder

The role of an Elder is rooted in sharing knowledge and experience

Elders often could not say when exactly they felt like Elders. In some cases, being an Elder was linked with a certain age (e.g. 60+) and in other cases, Elderhood began when Elders started teaching and being more respected in the community. Younger Elders sometimes identified as “Elders in training.” Being an Elder was closely linked with sharing knowledge and experiences with younger generations.

“Well in my cultural sense and I think that’s the only role that I know is to be a wisdom keeper. Everything that we learned throughout our life, we’re here to share it”



Intergenerational Connections

Elders found relationships with youth to be mutually beneficial

Elders passed on knowledge to younger generations, including skills such as gathering, hunting, preparing food, beading, sewing, carpentry, and advice. Elders also learned from youth. Whether it



was through seeing new ways to look at the world or youth teaching them how to use technology, Elders felt that relationships with youth were mutually beneficial. They showed respect for youth by wearing items youth made for them (i.e. necklace) and keeping cards and pictures. Programs like school lunches gave Elders the opportunity to connect with youth and receive a healthy meal. These programs were greatly appreciated.

“People...have a lot of knowledge that they pass on to the younger generation and show them how to do things that they probably have never done before. Plus, even aging you can watch them and learn a lot. I actually learn a lot from the younger generation too so.”

Southeast Alaska Programs & Services

Elders described programs they benefitted from and others that would be helpful to have



Healthcare Services

Elders used existing community medical care to maintain their health. They traveled to larger cities to receive specialty care. Elders described the need for in-home care and affordable long-term care options in their communities.



Organized Support

Elders used a variety of Tribal Supports, including rides, group lunches, meal deliveries, traditional knowledge classes, and firewood. They also used other local and regional non-tribal programs and services.



Unorganized Support

Elders received support from friends and family including socializing through visits, giving rides, bringing food, shoveling, firewood, and helping with basic living needs.

Substance Use & Recovery

Elders described recovery as a “return to balance and life”

It is important to consider the multigenerational impact substance misuse has on families including Elders. Often, when asked what advice they would give, Elders encouraged youth to avoid using substances, especially as the types of substances that people encounter are changing. Some Elders described their own recovery journeys, sharing stories of when they had their last drink. Some Elders felt more connected with their families after they stopped using substances. Some Elders mentioned that having a local treatment facility would be helpful for families and communities.

“I’m wishing for an alcohol and drug treatment facility. Not just for people that are affected by the alcohol and drugs, but I want it for the whole family—treatment for the whole family.”

“I used to go out and party with till Mother’s Day ’91, when I had my last drink, I stopped going to parties.”

Local Support Networks

To talk to someone immediately, set up a future appointment, or explore resources on your own, the below options are available. Contact your local provider or behavioral health aid for additional resources.

Resource	Contact
Crisis Lifeline (24/7) Connects to Local Resources	988
Alaska Careline	1-877-266-HELP (4357)
Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (ANTHC)	https://www.anthc.org/what-we-do/behavioral-health/resources/
Area O2 Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)	907-586-1161 <i>Outgoing informational message only</i>
Bartlett Hospital	907-796-8430
Catholic Community Services	907-463-6152
Community Connections	Ketchikan 907-225-7825 Craig 907-826-3891

Local Support Networks

Resource	Contact
Ketchikan Indian Community (KIC)	Get help now: 907-917-3168 General phone: 907-228-9203
SEARHC Helpline (24/7) Southeast Alaska Regional Health Consortium	1-877-294-0074
SAMHSA National Helpline (24/7) Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Admin.	1-800-662-HELP (4357) www.findtreatment.gov
Tlingit and Haida Community & Behavioral Services Healing Center	907-463-7305
Tlingit and Haida Central Council	National: 800-344-1432 Local: 907-586-1432
Veteran's Affairs (VA) Clinic Juneau	Main: 888-353-7574 Mental Health: 907-257-4854, Ext. 1

Recommendations

Advice from Elders - List of Recommendations -
Future Directions



Advice from Elders

On Aging Well

“And following your heart, following your gut, is really important.”

“But that’s all the hardships and just bear through it, get through it and do the best you can with what you got.”

“What I would define as successful aging would be to accept and prepare yourself and your family financially, physically, and emotionally how you're going to get through that period in your life.”

On Staying Active

“Get involved. There are programs that you can help with. Get involved in those programs.”

“I think the key to aging is to not hermit yourself. That would be one of my most important parts. And also taking care of yourself with medical, regular care.”

“Keep moving. I think that’s the key word to it. Even though they’re not feeling good, just get a few steps. Just got to circulate.”

“Just live your life the way your body wants you to. If you're strong, keep moving. If you're getting weak, keep moving. To me that’s what it is.”

On Gaining and Sharing Wisdom

“Your family is always going to be here. You can always come home to us whenever you want. Right now just go explore what’s out there.”

“Talk with them (Elders), let them tell you stories, and just listen. Actually do what they say. And if you don’t need that then, just put it for a later date.”

Recommendations

Engage

- Identify and generate opportunities to engage with youth
- Engage Elders and youth in community-level decision making

Build

- Rehabilitation centers to heal both individuals and whole families
- Robust in-home care programs and affordable, long term, culturally relevant, full-time care centers in the community

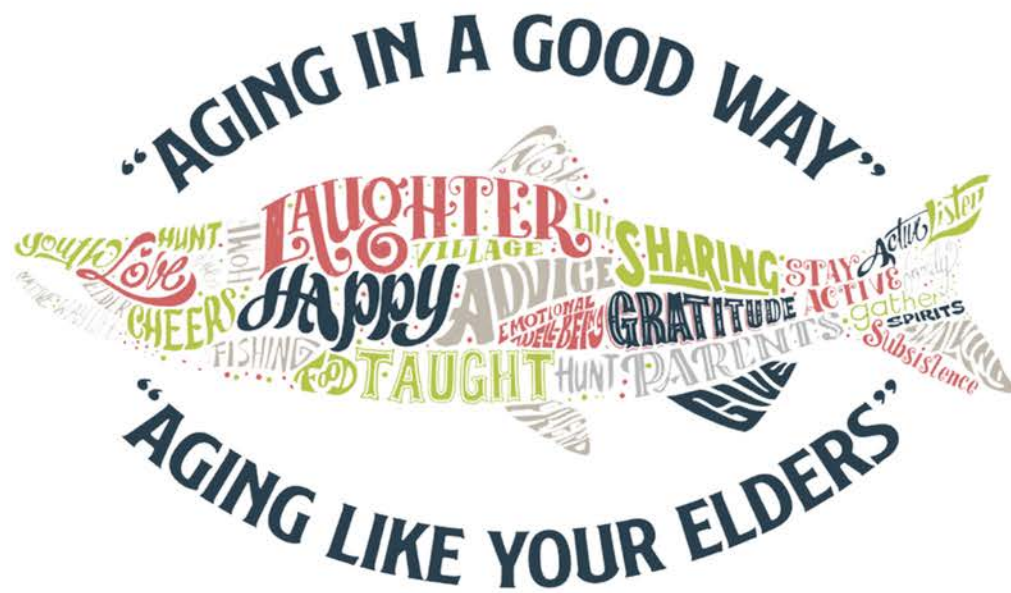
Create

- Opportunities to promote and preserve culture
- Spaces for physical activity and integrate both indoor and outdoor spaces
- Opportunities for community engagement

Future Directions

Our team would like to continue partnering with Southeast Alaskan communities to continue to explore in more detail what aging in a good way looks like and develop programs and policies to support aging in a good way in the places Elders wish to age. We are happy to co-write additional grants or plan additional projects that address community priorities that address Elder health and well being.

How might this report or future work benefit you and your community?



This report was prepared by members of the Alaska Native Successful Aging Study Team.

For more information, questions, or comments, please contact our Team at:

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