

Inviting and Honoring the Voice of the Community

Commentary on Ray et al., *Making a Community Health Needs Assessment Participatory: A Case Study from an Alaska Native Health Care Organization*

Southcentral Foundation Leadership

The heart of Southcentral Foundation's (SCF) customer-owned, relationship-based Nuka System of Care is the voice of Alaska Native and American Indian (AN/AI) peoples, which drives how the system operates and continues to evolve. SCF does not use the passive term "patients" but instead uses the term "customer-owner: to acknowledge that the community is both a customer of services provided and the owner of the system and their individual wellness. SCF is owned and operated by Alaska Native people, and the organization's direction and activities come from listening to the customer-owner. We draw upon the knowledge, strength, and history of Alaska Native peoples and relationships with one another, the land, and ancestors and those to come as a health care system. We have used multiple modes of listening and data collection in community needs assessments since time immemorial.

SCF began contracting with the federal government to provide services, and this role expanded in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1998, after more than 50 years of management by the Indian Health Service, SCF assumed complete responsibility for primary care services. In preparation for a historic change in healthcare management, we conducted the first needs assessment, holding various types of listening sessions with stakeholders from our region. We wanted to hear from everyone who had something to share. We wanted to hear people's concerns as well as their hopes. We wanted to learn what was going well, what needed to stop immediately, and what small and large changes needed to be made. The tribal, operational, and clinical leadership took time to review the feedback and took additional time to deeply consider and strategize how to use the feedback to create the organizational mission, vision, key points, and operational principles. The results of this needs assessment were utilized to develop, implement, and deliver programs of the Nuka System of Care.

With customer-ownership as the foundation for which the health care system is built, shaped, and improved, SCF has developed and manages a variety of listening posts. These listening posts are designed to ensure the wants and needs of customer-owners are elicited, heard, and integrated into every decision, structure, and process of the system. In the decades that have passed, we have strategically developed internal systems, processes, and most importantly, have nurtured the growth and development of people who have improvement, evaluation, research, and development experience and the lived experience of being a customer-owner. We were able to draw upon internal experts who utilize both Indigenous evaluation methods and Western improvement models to conduct our most recent community needs assessment and work with organizational leadership to translate evaluation findings into meaningful community health practices.

In 2018, we used these internal experts to conduct the second comprehensive needs assessment. The following are some recent improvements and expansions made by SCF in response to feedback provided by customer-owners:

- Investment and redesign of Dental Services to ensure that customer-owners have access to an integrated dental team of their choosing.
- Investment and improvement in the behavioral health continuum of care, including but not limited to: opening a Crisis Stabilization Center, planning for a 2-7 day residential treatment facility, expanding the role of Intensive Case Management and family-based community treatment, and the addition of two outpatient specialty behavioral health clinics.
- Expanded services for substance misuse.
- Launched a trauma-informed, culturally rooted program at Hiland Mountain Correctional Center, part of SCF's Nui'ju Healing Place therapeutic community.
- Opened the Centennial Center Clinic, in partnership with Cook Inlet Housing Authority, to provide easier access to medical services for its nearly 600 residents, half of whom are customer-owners.
- Continued work on improving the services already established within the Nuka System of Care.

As SCF continues to improve and expand services specific to the health care needs of Alaska Native and American Indian peoples, the voice of the customer-owner remains central.