

*With 3 million lakes and more than half a million square miles of pure nature, it's hard to envision Alaska as a place of thriving technology. But it is true. In fact, an economy built on development of Alaska's natural resources has allowed government and industry to invest and become one of the most technologically advanced states in the nation. So when the Alaska Turning Point Initiative was funded, public health stakeholders decided to take advantage of this technological leverage and create a public health information system.*

# Alaska Turning Point North to the Future

The Turning Point Initiative started with a general idea that the various components of the public health system in Alaska—state, local, tribal, public sector, private sector, nonprofits—already collected and analyzed a lot of health status information. It seemed feasible to find a way to create a single electronic “door” through which much of it could be made readily available on the state Web site. Add some census demographics and clear instructions on how to interpret and use health statistics and the Public Health Information System would be in business.

It's not as easy as it sounds.

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surprise, however, was how difficult it was simply to *obtain* the data. Creating the Public Health Information System probed some



sensitive parts of the organizational culture: possessiveness by those who “owned” the various databases, concerns about the public misunderstanding or misinterpreting data, even questions about why it was necessary or beneficial to make data available to the public.

The initiative also had to plow through ways to promote an external focus on the public rather than an internal focus on the agency, and found obstacles when experimenting with approaches to data analysis and presentation. How could they present data on a small village without breaching

privacy? These obstacles are expected in any project implementation, but add the additional challenges of a change in political leadership, significant budget cuts, department-wide reorganization, and a high rate of team member turnover, and the initiative's focus went from just implementing a plan to keeping the plan alive as players came and went.

But the initiative endured and what resulted was the long-awaited Alaska Public Health Information System, now live and available to the public on the WorldWide Web. The system provides one-stop-shopping for health statistics and data and is available to the public. The Alaska Turning Point Initiative was able not only to pull buried data together in an efficient, categorical, user-friendly portal, but to complete the project amidst chaotic environmental changes.

There were of course technical issues to sort out, design questions to settle, and access concerns to address. The biggest

# At a Glance: Alaska



## Aim of Alaska Turning Point

Alaska Turning Point has focused on developing a strong public health system to protect and improve the health of Alaskans. The two goals of this project are to: 1) provide information to policy makers, public health system partners, and the general public about the health status of Alaskans; and 2) provide community-based organizations with data and information, as well as the technical assistance on how to use it, in order to conduct community assessments and plan health improvement initiatives.

## Alaska's Public Health Challenges

The effectiveness of Alaska's public health system is challenged by the emergence of new public health problems and environmental issues and by changes to health systems, health care financing, and government structures. Public health has a mission to protect and improve health.



To carry out this mission effectively and use its resources wisely, the public health system needs up-to-date information about the diseases, conditions, and other health threats affecting population groups. Among the most significant and persistent public health concerns in Alaska today are tobacco use, alcohol consumption, injuries, suicide, nutrition, and chronic diseases. Inadequate access to health status statistics and information was identified in the Alaska Public Health Improvement process as a significant problem in Alaska's public health system.

## Alaska Turning Point's Contribution to Improving Public Health

- Displaying public health information in a location accessible to all components of a complex public health system to assist with decision making at all levels
- Making reports, publications, and analyses developed by Turning Point available on the Internet to be used to assess health needs, establish priorities, and develop improvement strategies on a state, regional, or local level
- Identifying and setting goals to be reached among communities throughout Alaska using data to impact key health issues

## For More Information

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