

**2010 Alaska Rural Health Association**  
**Outstanding Rural Health Organization: Alicia Roberts Medical Center**

The award is based on the staff's dramatic success in improving access to health care on Prince of Wales Island in southern Southeast Alaska, their commitment to continually improving the quality of services available, and for their leadership in the development of a new provider type, the Frontier Extended Stay Clinic.

The Alicia Roberts Medical Center (ARMC) has become a national leader in providing exemplary rural health services. This is directly attributable to the dedication and loyalty of the ARMC staff to the people of Prince of Wales Island. The growth in clinic services, while needed, would not have been possible if not for the extraordinary efforts and teamwork of the staff.

Fifteen years ago, the Alicia Roberts Medical Center, located in Klawock, was a Level I clinic staffed with 3 community health aides to provide health care services to SEARHC's Native beneficiaries on Prince of Wales Island (POW). The clinic was located in a small building which now houses the Klawock Community Library. Services were understandably limited, but began to increase with the addition of midlevel and, subsequently, physician level providers. The Klawock Heenya Corporation asked SEARHC to partner with them in developing a larger clinic. They funded the renovation of a grocery store into a clinic, and SEARHC agreed to provide the services. The commitment of the Klawock Heenya Corporation and their partnership with SEARHC proved beneficial to the island's residents. Eventually, SEARHC bought the clinic from Klawock Heenya Corporation, and continued to expand services in response to need.

In 2000, ARMC suddenly became the only provider of emergency and after-hour care on the island. This resulted in a large infusion of non-Native patients into the practice. The staff at ARMC met the challenge on very short notice, increasing their capacity to provide the needed services.

The next stage of development was a successful application to become a Community Health Center. This designation was sought to allow improved access to services for all the residents of the island, regardless of ability to pay. ARMC now offers a sliding fee scale, and is a sub-regional health center that provides all residents of POW a broad range of medical, dental and behavioral health services. The Denali Commission funded an expansion of the clinic, which was completed in 2005. In addition to the expanded primary care services, a moderate complexity laboratory, comprehensive pharmacy, and numerous wellness programs also operate from the Medical Center. They remain the only provider of after hour health care to a population of approximately 4,700 rural residents. Pictures of the new clinic are included below:



ARMC staff fully embrace a variety of wellness and disease prevention programs offered through SEARHC. Staff strive to address all aspects of patients' physical, mental, and spiritual health through integration of the following programs and activities into the primary care and community settings:

- Breast and Cervical Health Program focusing on cancer screening
- WISEWOMAN and Strong Woman Programs focusing on women's cardiovascular disease prevention
- Diabetes prevention and management
- Community Wellness Advocates providing community-based disease prevention and wellness activities
- Injury prevention
- Tobacco cessation and prevention
- Primary care, diabetes awareness, and physical fitness classes offered at the senior center
- Culture camps promoting traditional Native lifestyle and wellness
- Community-based wellness fairs
- Community-based nutrition counseling
- Employee wellness

As a sub-regional hub, ARMC provides support to several other SEARHC facilities on Prince of Wales Island. The clinic provides phone triage and medical consultations for providers in Hydaburg, Thorne Bay, and Kasaan. This includes emergency and scheduled referrals and assistance with medical transports. ARMC staff provide itinerant physician, dental and behavioral health services to the Hydaburg Health Center. They also provide supervisory oversight of the physician assistant practices in Hydaburg and Thorne Bay.

POW is approximately 135 miles long, 45 miles wide and 2,231 square miles in area. The 990 mile long coastline of the island is etched with numerous bays and coves. Access to the island is by air or water. There are extensive areas of steep, forested mountains that isolate the communities on POW from each other and broad stretches of

unprotected ocean waters which separate POW Island from the larger regional medical facilities and hospitals located in Juneau, Ketchikan, and Sitka. Dense fog and storms are normal weather patterns, often resulting in delayed transportation off the island.

Patients who need a higher level of care are usually transferred either to Ketchikan General Hospital or Mt. Edgecumbe Hospital in Sitka. Patients may also be transported directly to the Alaska Native Medical Center in Anchorage, or occasionally to hospitals in Seattle. Travel from POW to obtain higher levels of care is challenging. For example, to reach Sitka from Prince of Wales Island, it is necessary to travel by small plane or ferry to Ketchikan and then fly on Alaska Airlines to Sitka. This can usually be accomplished in one day, if the weather is good and the flights are on time. For the tertiary care available in Anchorage, it is another 700 air miles north of Sitka. This presents considerable difficulties and expense for the patients, not to mention their loved ones who may wish to be with them. Transportation delays for seriously ill or injured patients can be life threatening.

Responding to long-expressed needs and desires of the people of Prince of Wales Island, SEARHC examined the possibility of developing a critical access hospital. It was determined that this was not financially feasible. Instead, a new model emerged from the discussions: Frontier Extended Stay Clinics. This model was proposed to enhance the existing services by allowing staff to provide high quality extended services in two situations: when a seriously ill or injured patient needed transportation to a higher level of care, but was unable to be transported due to weather, darkness, or other limitations; and when the clinic could safely provide monitoring and observation for limited periods of time.

The passage of the Medicare Modernization Act of 2003 included a provision for the development of a Frontier Extended Stay Services demonstration by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS). An additional demonstration funded by the HRSA Office of Rural Health Policy allowed the development of the Alaska FESC Consortium, of which SEARHC is the lead agency and ARMC is one of the five demonstration sites. Staffing, equipment, and facility upgrades were funded by the demonstration project. This has allowed ARMC to provide extended services to patients, often allowing patients to be treated on the island without having to be transported to a higher level of care. This service is deeply appreciated by the residents. A special "FESC" room was developed during the remodeling of the clinic. Pictures of the improved emergency room, and the FESC room, are included below.



ARMC Emergency Room



ARMC FESC Room

Staff was very involved in the details of developing the FESC environment, from choosing the paint color and linens, to determining which equipment needed to be available. The result is a very pleasing, functional, and comfortable accommodation for patients who need to stay for an extended period of time. Patients have been grateful for the opportunity to receive their care in their home community, surrounded by their loved ones, often avoiding the expense and difficulties of traveling altogether.

A comprehensive program evaluation is a very time consuming but essential part of the FESC demonstration project. Every time a person has an extended stay, a detailed encounter log has to be completed and submitted electronically to the evaluators. Staff have been vigilant about completing the encounter logs accurately and completely.

Alicia Roberts Medical Center staff has proved that they have the resilience and strength to pull together as a team. The strong personal commitment to customer service of each staff member has contributed to its success thus far. ARMC staff has effectively reviewed policies and procedures to ensure accuracy and to maintain high ethical standards. Each staff member has displayed a commitment to achieving excellence and accepting responsibility, as a team.

Changes are not accomplished easily. The staff at ARMC has demonstrated extraordinary patience, professionalism, commitment, and leadership in the development of health care services for the people of Prince of Wales Island.