



# THE ALLIANCE'S EMERGENT STRATEGY:

LAYING A STRONG FOUNDATION FOR CHANGE



# CONTRIBUTORS

## ALLIANCE BACKBONE TEAM

Sylvia Craig, Evaluation Contractor, McKinley Research Group

Leah Ferguson, Facilitation and Network Development Contractor, Circle Forward

Ruby Fried, Data and Assessment Contractor, University of Alaska Anchorage Division of Population Health Sciences

Tiffany Hall, Executive Director, Recover Alaska

Travis Hedwig, Data and Assessment Contractor, University of Alaska Anchorage Division of Population Health Sciences

Tracy Kunkler, Facilitation and Network Development Contractor, Circle Forward

Jessica Limbird, Coordinator, Recover Alaska

Kelby Murphy, Communications Contractor, Walsh Sheppard

Michael Powell, Grant Manager, Alaska Department of Health and Social Services Division of Behavioral Health Section of Prevention and Early Intervention, Alcohol Safety Action Program

Rebecca Van Wyck, Data and Assessment Contractor, University of Alaska Anchorage Division of Population Health Sciences

## ALLIANCE MEMBERS

Til Beetus, Interior Regional Co-Chair, Independent Consultant

Hope Finkelstein, Member and Organizational Design Workgroup participant, Alaska Department of Health and Social Services Division of Behavioral Health Office of Substance Misuse & Addiction Prevention

Eva Gregg, Member and Organizational Design Workgroup participant, Rural Alaska Community Action Program

William Hurr, Member and Strategy Workgroup participant, Boys & Girls Club - Alaska

Marilyn Pierce-Bulger, Member and Communications Workgroup participant, Alaska Center for FASD

Loyd Platson, Southeast Regional Co-Chair and Organizational Design Workgroup participant, Sitka Counseling

Stephanie Stillwell, Member and Gulf Coast Regional Co-Chair, SRS Consulting

Jennifer Summers, Member and Strategy Workgroup participant, Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium Substance Misuse Prevention Program

Laura Nauriaq Thomas, Member and Organizational Design Workgroup participant, North Slope Borough Health Department

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*Prepared by The Stellar Group*

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## BACKGROUND:

# MOVING UPSTREAM

### ALCOHOL MISUSE IN ALASKA

Alcohol misuse has been a significant issue in Alaska since the arrival of European-American colonizers. “There’s a history of coordinated use of alcohol to manipulate people, particularly Alaska Native people,” explains State of Alaska Division of Behavioral Health Program Manager Michael Powell. “They used it to bribe because it was such an effective tool to coerce people. We know firsthand the harms it’s caused and we’re still suffering from those harms.” Many communities continue to struggle with ongoing trauma as a result.

Up in the North Slope, Alliance member Laura Nauriaq Thomas echoes this reality of historical trauma, “We are still coming to terms with our trauma [in Utqiagvik] and so talking about alcohol when we haven’t talked about boarding schools, Bureau of Indian Affairs schools, land grabs, so on and so on, is a little bit difficult.”

Excessive alcohol use also continues to impact the lives of Alaskans today through the powerful influence of alcohol industry lobbyists, continues Michael Powell, as well as the independent, ‘do what you want’ culture in the state.

That individualistic mindset also permeates much of the prevention field trying to address this concern. “To date, alcohol [misuse] prevention lives within a behavioral health arena that is grounded in individual’s choice and the whole idea that alcohol is a behavioral health problem that can be willed away; ‘just say no’ kind of philosophy,” explains Alliance member Hope Finkelstein. “We in the Alliance are so far from that. We recognize the social determinants of health, we look at the racial inequities, the health disparities, and we’re laying the foundation for that work.”

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*There’s this story: There are people on the riverbank, and they see a baby in the water and say, ‘Let’s save this baby!’ Then, the next day, there’s another baby. After that, there are more babies and they’re saving these babies, when they should be looking into why these babies are falling in the river upstream.*

**TIL BEETUS**

*The Alliance Interior Regional Co-Chair*

### THE OPPORTUNITY

The development of an alcohol misuse prevention alliance traces back to 2011 when alcohol misuse prevention was identified as a priority by the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) Division of Behavioral Health (DBH).

“It was all orchestrated through the federal grant that did a statewide needs assessment. Alcohol misuse prevention was identified as the number one biggest issue,” explains Michael Powell. “I realized in terms of prevention work, we weren’t doing anything statewide to coordinate it. One of the strategies that worked in tobacco prevention was to support a statewide alliance. The Alaska Tobacco Control Alliance started the same way, it was a CDC-funded initiative to address tobacco prevention. The idea around doing something similar for alcohol misuse prevention seemed logical. It’s a different substance, so there are different rules and laws....**What I knew about how this process would work [was that it] would be a lot of trailblazing.**”

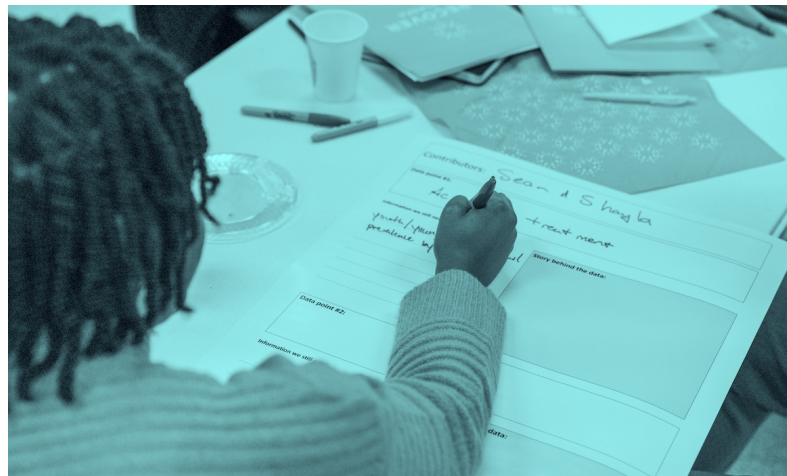
## BACKGROUND: MOVING UPSTREAM

He adds, “It got set aside for several reasons – staff turnover, we lost our lead supervisor, the opioid epidemic came in and swept everyone’s attention away. So now this is a re-emergence of trying to address what we identified years ago as our top priority. Opioids, marijuana, and methamphetamines are all critical issues, but **alcohol is the number one problem with the biggest impact.**”

Alliance Coordinator Jess Limbird shares, “Now, [alcohol misuse] seems to be relegated to the area of intractable problem - just too big of a problem to solve. Which is unfortunate, because it’s connected with every other priority issue area in Alaska - violence, suicide, unintentional injury, addiction, crime, child maltreatment - you name it and there’s a strong chance that alcohol is involved.”

Previously, the North Slope Borough Health Department held the Strategic Prevention Framework State Incentive Grant from the Alaska DHSS DBH to address alcohol misuse in their communities before it evolved into a state-wide alliance model. Laura Nauriaq Thomas describes this transition, “Before the Alliance existed, Recover Alaska had a meeting in Anchorage pulling together different partnerships. DeShaun Whiskey [Alliance Northern Regional Co-Chair] and I were involved in grant writing, before we knew we’d be the Alliance, as a kind of coalition getting ready for Recover Alaska to submit the grant. We were very excited, and I was loud and vocal about the need for the Alliance.”

Jenn Summers of the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (ANTHC) describes the initial stages of applying for this grant. “At the very beginning of the grant even being released, we had conversations with Recover Alaska to see if it was going to be a partnership between ANTHC and Recover Alaska... it was clear that it would be a better fit for Recover Alaska to take that on and for us to be a partner.”



# THE ALLIANCE: A NOVEL AND DELIBERATE APPROACH



*We know that alcohol misuse is a complex problem with complex consequences which require a complex approach. There's no simple fix. No individual agency, no one program can deal with it. We have to approach this from a variety of perspectives. It's an all-hands-on-deck kind of situation.*

**HOPE FINKELSTEIN**  
*The Alliance Member*

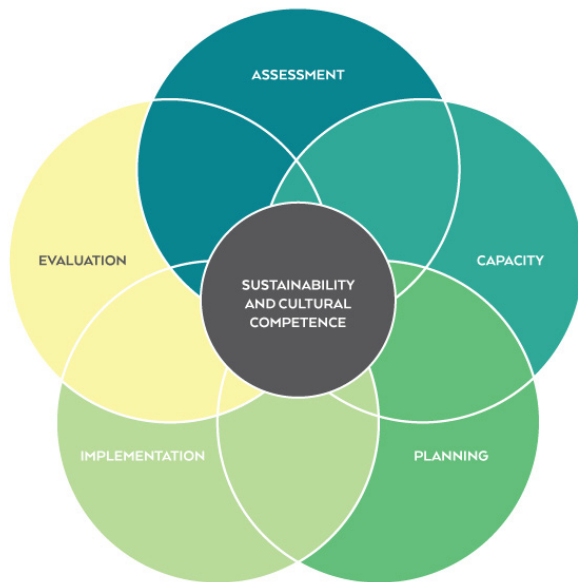
In the fall of 2019, Recover Alaska was awarded a Comprehensive Behavioral Health Prevention and Early Intervention Services Grant from the Alaska DHSS DBH to coordinate a comprehensive statewide

approach to address alcohol misuse. This grant builds off the state's previous Strategic Prevention Framework State Incentive Grant, which uses the planning model promoted by the Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). This model includes assessment, capacity, planning, implementation, and evaluation, as well as guiding principles of cultural competence and sustainability.<sup>1</sup>

The Alliance is a collaborative effort of multiple and diverse partners across Alaska who recognize the impacts of alcohol misuse on individuals and communities and are personally and professionally committed to working together to address this complex, statewide problem. Individuals across the state including representatives from community coalitions, public health and prevention staff, prevention funders, and community members have played critical roles in developing the foundation and structure of the Alliance. More than the number of members currently engaged with the network, the relationships formed are critical.

**The mission of the Alliance is to engage people and communities as partners, to promote individual and community wellness, and prevent excessive alcohol use and harms in Alaska.**

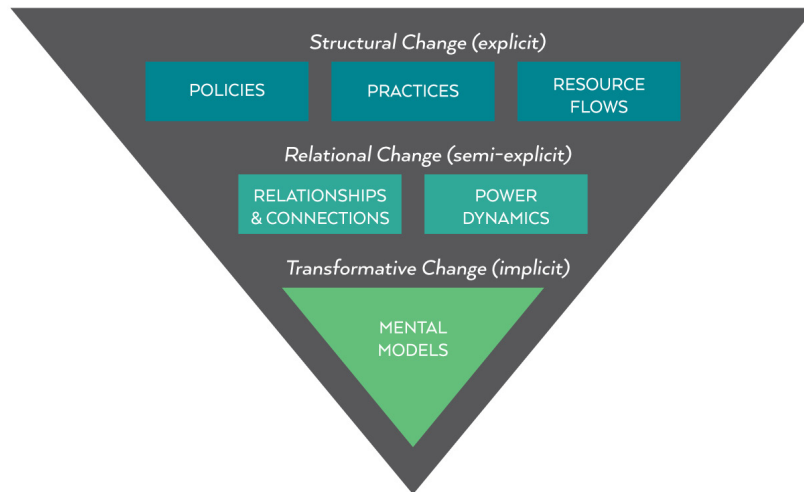
The collaborative approach is key to the structure of the Alliance. "Alaska, in particular, is so siloed as far as public health versus non-profit versus hospitals versus private practice, and then Alaska Native medical versus non-Alaska Native," explains contractor Kelby Murphy. "I see [the Alliance] as really opening up the potential to get to the root causes of why there might be suffering in individuals or communities and normalize people working together to solve those problems, and community members being part of that process too."



Strategic Prevention Framework

<sup>1</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: A Guide to SAMHSA's Strategic Prevention Framework. Rockville, MD: Center for Substance Abuse Prevention Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2019. <https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/20190620-samhsa-strategic-prevention-framework-guide.pdf>

# THE ALLIANCE: A NOVEL AND DELIBERATE APPROACH



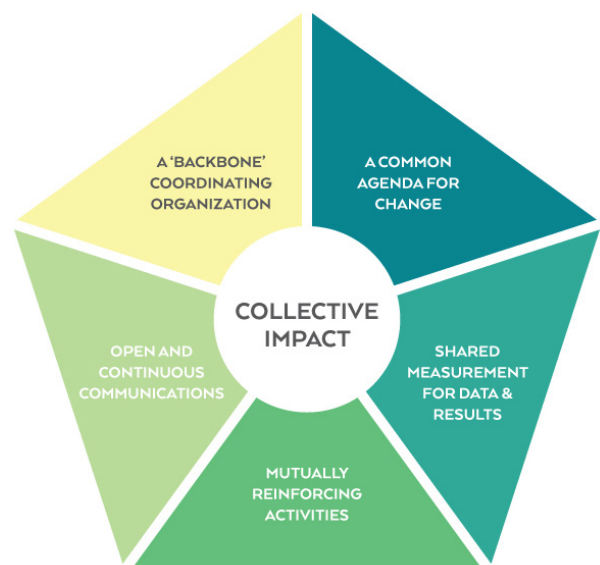
Water of Systems Change: Six Conditions of System Change

The Alliance is informed by multiple frameworks, one being the Collective Impact Framework, which creates a structured way for people and organizations to work together for a shared purpose. The framework includes a common agenda, shared measures, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and a backbone organization or team.<sup>2</sup>

The Alliance Common Agenda defines its strategic direction, which is built around three strategies – build relationships, build power, and build shared meaning - and six conditions of systems change: policies, practices, resource flows, relationships and connections, power dynamics, and mental models.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, the Alliance overlays Collective Impact with the Emergent Strategy Framework. Emergent Strategy, developed by adrienne maree brown, means “how we intentionally change in ways that grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for.”<sup>4</sup> Emergent strategy is made up of

seven interrelated core elements, which the Alliance embodies through its work: non-linear and iterative, adaptive, creating more possibilities, resilience and transformative justice, interdependence and decentralization, and fractal.



Collective Impact Framework

<sup>2</sup>“Collective Impact Forum: What Is Collective Impact?” n.d. <https://www.collectiveimpactforum.org/what-collective-impact>.

<sup>3</sup> Kania, J., Kramer, M., & Senge, P. (2020, May 27). The Water of Systems Change FSG. [https://www.fsg.org/publications/water\\_of\\_systems\\_change](https://www.fsg.org/publications/water_of_systems_change).

<sup>4</sup> brown, adrienne m. Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change. Changing Worlds. Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017.

## THE ALLIANCE:

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*I feel connected to the Alliance members as human beings. Because time was built in to have connection. I feel like now we have the strength and ability to actually do things. Often times grants are thrown at people with three years and some new plan is rolled out and it's not successful, and there's no sustainability because the relationships are not there – not just people who I can get to sign an MOA because of our professional connections, but real human connections.*

**LAURA NAURIAQ THOMAS**  
*The Alliance Member*

journey itself. It's the journey which will create the new ways of doing and being which we are looking for. The end result will be much better and there will be greater buy-in." This approach is used to develop the structure and focus of the Alliance, and develop its foundational document, the Common Agenda.

The slow, iterative approach can be a challenge when working within the confines of grant funding structures that require specific outcomes and deadlines. Michael Powell understands this challenge and works with the Alliance to provide as much flexibility as possible. "Mostly my role [as grant manager] is to provide technical assistance and support but try not to impede community initiative," he explains. "Often the complaint I get from grantees is that our process gets in the way of them doing what they feel would be most productive for the community."



### NON-LINEAR AND ITERATIVE

A non-linear and iterative approach is central to the functioning of the Alliance, and not only because it is implementing a new initiative for alcohol misuse prevention. This approach allows the Alliance to explore possibilities, test out new ideas, and continually recenter new developments towards their shared vision of community wellness. Alliance Gulf Coast Regional Co-Chair Stephanie Stillwell explains, "We don't go into things with this idea like, 'We know how to do this, it's going to be done this particular way.' We all have input to share, and we can shift and pivot as we need to."

Like others involved in the Alliance, Southeast Regional Co-Chair Loyd Platson appreciates this process. "The process takes longer to move through, but part of the endpoint and effectiveness lies in the



### ADAPTIVE

Inherent to the non-linear, iterative approach of the Alliance is a need to be adaptive. The Alliance models this in their development and expansion of Regional Co-Chairs to increase local-level representation, as well as their development and dissolution of workgroups as needed. Even the structure of membership is being reevaluated as the Alliance explores options other than fee-based membership in order to increase accessibility and engagement.

This also means those involved need to be adaptive at the individual level. Contractor Rebecca Van Wyck shares, "**The Alliance's emergent strategy is very different. Very iterative, changeable.** So, when looking for direction, that can cause some frustration...But I have been impressed with how



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it has built meaning and investment from Alliance members.”

Contractor Leah Ferguson further explains, “People aren’t used to working like this, this honest and vulnerable. **We deeply believe in order to be transformative you have to do self-work and you have to have your own practices.**”



### CREATING MORE POSSIBILITIES

In many ways, the existence of an alcohol misuse prevention Alliance is in itself creating more possibilities. While developing the grant, Michael Powell found that there was limited federal guidance on the topic. Alaska effectively created a novel approach to alcohol misuse prevention, which he hopes can serve as a model for SAMHSA and the CDC to take lessons learned and develop guidance for other states at the federal level.

Using a Collective Impact Framework, the Alliance is able to accomplish what no one organization can do alone by breaking down existing siloes and fostering connection among individuals across the state.

A major feature of the culture of the Alliance is bringing one’s whole self to the work, or, as contractor Ruby Fried describes it, “Bringing our entire person to the work and not just your professional persona.” This means being willing to be vulnerable, speaking authentically, and engaging in deep conversation.

“I always feel like I’m learning things from others in the room,” reflects Alliance member Will Hurr. “There’s definitely a lot of talk around lived experience and how that plays a role... around the

power of peer support and peer-led efforts that I think are broadening the conversation outside of the siloes. **The conversations are not what they used to be. Which is good.**”



*I have a lot of questions, but I don't have all the answers. But we do. **Collectively, we have all the answers.** And without working together, the piece of the puzzle we hold isn't put into the big picture. It's bringing our own skill sets, talents, and lived experiences to the table. Each person brings a piece of the puzzle. Each person has an answer. Sometimes those answers aren't brought out of someone until a question is asked. So, those conversations that we're having allow people to reveal their piece of the puzzle and their individual answers that help do this work.*

**EVA GREGG**  
*The Alliance Member*



### RESILIENCE AND TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE

The approach of the Alliance is strongly based on the ideals of equity, inclusion, justice, and addressing the root causes of alcohol misuse. “I think I’ve become a better advocate and a better ally,” says Alliance member Marilyn Pierce-Bulger. “I see more connections between structural things we’ve imposed on ourselves that maybe we don’t need and that’s again coming from that subconscious or

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cultural influence that Americans, particularly white Americans, have.”

The Alliance centers equity internally by engaging with and including representation of rural and off-road communities, Alaska Native people, and other underrepresented groups in the state to foster and support local-level prevention networks and programs. Contractor Sylvia Craig shares, “I think there is a real understanding [in the Alliance] of ways that statewide groups have not worked before, and that urban centers like Anchorage, Mat-Su, Fairbanks, Juneau will eat up a lot of time and real estate and space... smaller communities just don’t get the same representation and there’s a really intentional eye on that [in the Alliance]. **I think it’s working to allow communities outside urban centers to show up.**”

The Alliance also hosts equity trainings for members and the broader public. “There’s good people out there and we’re seeking them out and giving them a little insight on how to better do their work too. I appreciate them getting the perspectives from us, from BIPOCs,” explains Til Beetus, Interior Regional Co-Chair, who has assisted in hosting the equity trainings.



## INTERDEPENDENCE AND DECENTRALIZATION

As part of their dedication to equity, the Alliance works in a decentralized and interdependent manner. Consent-based decision-making, rather than majority-rules decision-making, is central to the Alliance’s core functioning. “Every member of the group has a voice and they’re allowed to share those with the rest of the group – with dignity and

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*The consent approach is to ground people in their ‘I am’ and shift to ‘we are’ while still holding the principle of self in the space, while recognizing the other. You get a sense of a higher purpose that you all hold together and how that fits in to the things I also hold as fundamental values and my own purpose. And holding both of those spaces, I can continue to be fully engaged in this effort but not myopically centered on what I’m going to get out of it.*

**LEAH FERGUSON**

*The Alliance Facilitation and Network Development Contractor*

respect. There isn’t one person making that executive decision for the rest of the group, it really is group decisions,” explains Alliance member Eva Gregg.

However, no form of decision-making is without its challenges. For example, members pose questions such as, does silence equal consent when decisions are made? Does this model put people on the spot if they don’t consent? To what extent do members have final decision-making power, and how much ultimately depends on the approval of the grant recipient?

Another way in which the Alliance works in an interdependent and decentralized manner is by building capacity for self-organizing among members. Jess Limbird explains, “It’s an equity practice to meet people where they are, so when we began, we met each other where we all were more comfortable, with me serving in a more traditional coordination role. As our awareness of the possibilities around how we work together grow and change, our challenge is to transition to self organizing... on our way to a fully

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realized systems change network. Can the trust we've built sustain us? Do we have the structures in place to grow with purpose and intention? And how do we hold one another accountable in the spirit of love and justice?"

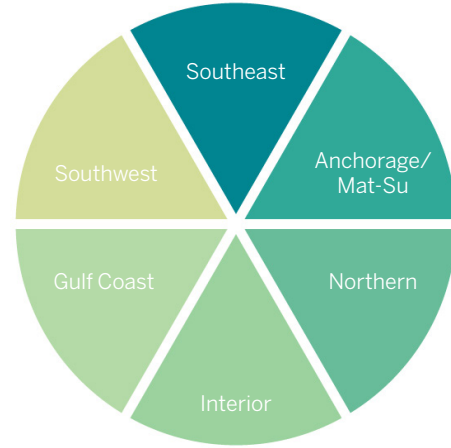


### FRACTAL

A fractal is a repeating, complex pattern across different scales of size. The Alliance engages a variety of stakeholders, from State departments to local community organizations, as well as interested individuals from around the state to engage on a shared issue.

In a state as large as Alaska, having real connections and sustainable relationships at the local level is a challenge. The structure of Alliance Regional Co-Chairs representing each of the public health regions helps to address this challenge. "We all know people in our region, and we're dedicated to it and getting the word out," explains Til Beetus. However, Regional Co-Chairs have large areas to represent. "The interior has about 40 villages, 40 communities, and it's huge for me as the only Interior Co-Chair," Til continues. To address this, the Alliance adapted its structure and is currently doubling the number of Regional Co-Chairs.

Members are also incorporating some of the practices of the Alliance in their own organizations and other networks to create new norms for working together. Jess Limbird explains, "[We are] not just scaling up to higher tiers within the social-ecological model, the Alliance is scaling out. People engaged with the work are taking what they are learning and experiencing together back to their own organizations and communities and replicating, adapting as needed for their own unique needs."



Regions

Several individuals have begun using the consent-based decision-making process in their non-profit organizations and local coalitions, and even in their personal lives. The Alliance also spurs new connections and side projects among those involved, further breaking down siloes in the field. For example, now the Alliance and the Alaska Wellness Coalition (which many Alliance members are part of) work together to support each other's respective scopes of work.



*When people talk about the work they do, it sounds like they are being more thoughtful as opposed to simply going through the motions. I can definitely say that for myself – I'm thinking more about who might be involved in a particular issue, who we might need to connect with, and really increasing collaboration or suggesting that to other clients with whom I work.*

**KELBY MURPHY**  
*The Alliance Communications Contractor*

## LOOKING AHEAD:

# THE MILESTONES ARE COMING

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*[The Alliance] is young, but it's powerful and I think the milestones are coming. They are coming. There are milestones we have achieved like the Common Agenda, like the retreats, those are milestones. But true milestones will come when the work really starts to influence and help people out of alcoholism.*

**EVA GREGG**  
*The Alliance Member*

The Alliance has spent its first years developing a strong foundation with a Common Agenda that defines its primary goal and strategic direction, and has a strong group of members who have been actively engaged in defining what the Alliance is.

Now, **members are eager to move into action and launch from this foundation they have built.** The Alliance members see several possibilities for their action, such as serving as a hub of information on alcohol misuse prevention, advocating for changes in the prevention field, or hosting trainings and mentorship between communities. Some members think there is an opportunity to expand beyond alcohol, while others wish to see alcohol become more of a central focus to the work. The strategies and conditions for systems change identified in the Common Agenda serve as a guide for navigating these new possibilities.

One thing all members agree on is **they are excited to engage more community in the Alliance, expand their network, and increase representation.** “I’m not sure what [community engagement] looks like yet. I want to see new faces,” reflects Stephanie Stillwell. “And decrease jargon we use to make it more enticing

for people to be a part of it that aren’t working in prevention. Let’s get away from this grant-based jargon talk and speak real, because I’m all about bringing the community into the conversations and not just having the agencies up above doing it.” As the Alliance engages more individuals and organizations around the state, revisiting their membership structure helps to **clarify roles and expectations.**

**Sustainability is top of mind** for many members as they enter their third year of the grant. As Tiffany Hall of Recover Alaska explains, “We have one funding source right now but Recover Alaska is also thinking about how to sustain the Alliance and looking at current funding partners as well as new funding partners for potential other revenue, which is important.”

Others think of sustainability in different terms. “I don’t mean sustainability of money,” shares contractor Travis Hedwig. “I mean sustainability of effort. People are putting out [energy], I feel it.” However, there remains strong optimism and support for the work of the Alliance. As contractor Tracy Kunkler shares, “We have a good foundation about the culture, and clarity about the purpose that will contribute to the actualization of the Common Agenda.”

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*“This might actually lead somewhere different; it might start to touch the more profound levels of change than what people have seen in the past.”*

**TRACY KUNKLER**  
*The Alliance Facilitation and Network Development Contractor*