



**Alaska
Native
Birthworkers
Community**

Sovereignty from First Breath

NIHB Perinatal ECHO

January 23, 2024

Margaret David, CNM

Helena Jacobs, MPP

Who We Are



ANBC Creators-R: Stacey Lucason, Margaret David with Tala David, Helena Jacobs, Abra Patkotak, Charlene Apok, Stefanie Cromarty.

The Alaska Native Birthworkers Community is a community-based group of full spectrum Indigenous birth helpers and reproductive justice advocates organizing to reclaim Indigenous birth practices and to support Native families from preconception through postpartum with culturally-matched care.

How we came together



Vision

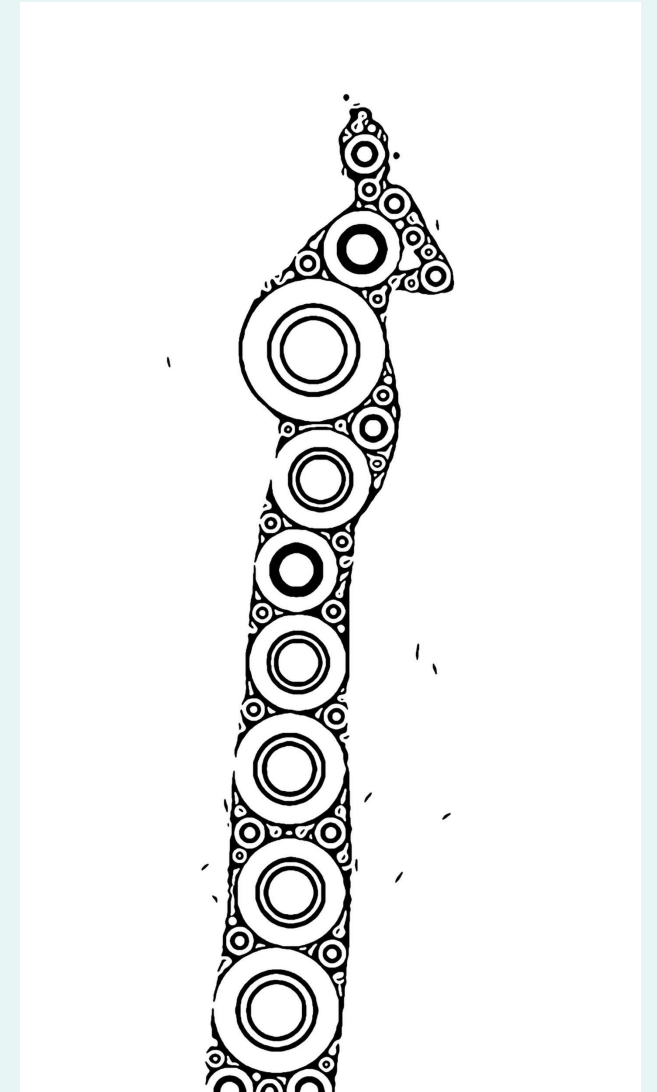
Our communities reconnected to birth through reclamation of ancestral knowledge and exercising sovereignty from birth.

Mission

To serve Alaska Native birthing families so that they feel supported, well cared for, and full of the information they need to make confident choices around reproductive health, birthing, and parenthood. In doing this, we seek to reclaim as well as create new ceremony to heal our ancestors, ourselves, and future generations who may have been harmed through the colonization of our bodies, healthcare, and birthing practices.

Values

- ❖ Responsibility to Community
- ❖ Culturally Matched Care
- ❖ Connection to Land and Waters
- ❖ Upholding Ceremony and Cultural Teachings



What We Do

Our current services focus on three areas:

- Supporting Native birthing families
- Growing a statewide network of trained Native birthworkers
- Collaborating with partners for systemic change to better support Native and rural birthing families



Community Wellness Events

- Drop-in visiting circles
- Traditional arts & craft workshops
- Traditional knowledge virtual sharing circles
- Childbirth preparation retreats



Growing the Circle of Indigenous Birthworkers in Alaska

- Full Spectrum Indigenous Doula Training 2021
- Indigenous Lactation Counselor Training 2021
- Indigenous Childbirth Educator Training 2022
- Sitnasuaq Birthworkers Support Gathering 2023
- Virtual networking circles, Skill shares





Current ANBC Birthworkers

Abra Patkotak (Iñupiaq), Charlene Apok (Iñupiaq), Dalecia Young (Iñupiaq), Helena Jacobs (Koyukon Athabascan), Katrina Leary (Yup'ik & Athabascan), Lindsey Earnest (Chippewa), Laura Young (Iñupiaq), Margaret David (Koyukon Athabascan), Shawna Whaley (Suqpiaq), Amiah Johnson (Tlingit & Athabascan), Panganga Pungowiyi (St. Lawrence Island Yupik)



Indigenous people have supported each other during childbirth since time immemorial...

What is a Birth Helper/ Doula

A birth helper is someone who provides continuous physical, emotional, spiritual, and informational support to a birthing person before, during, and after childbirth, and during the full spectrum (or full circle) of reproductive health experiences. A birth helper can be a valuable member to the birth team, in addition to the partner, family, labor nurse, midwife and/or doctor. As Alaska Native birth helpers, we support and center a family's cultural practices.

What does a Birth Helper do:

- Share information and resources to help prepare for birth, postpartum, parenting
- Provide one-to-one support during labor
 - be a continuous supportive presence
 - help to create a comfortable environment
 - provide reassurance
 - support birthing person's decisions
 - help with comfort techniques
 - share support to entire family
- Help with breastfeeding and postpartum support



A birth helper does not make any decisions for the birthing person, perform any clinical tasks, or access the birthing person's private health information.

Benefits

[Research](#) shows that birthing people who use a trained labor companion are:

- More likely to have a spontaneous vaginal birth (less likely to need Pitocin)
- More likely to have a shorter labor than they would have otherwise
- Less likely to have a cesarean birth (or a forceps/vacuum assisted vaginal birth)
- Less likely to use any pain medication
- More likely to have positive feelings about their childbirth experience



Deeper roles/responsibilities of Indigenous Birth Helper

- accountable to community
- practice through relationship
- honor reciprocity
- kinship responsibilities
- family ties
- defend the sacred
- uphold ceremony
- use Indigenous languages
- community lens
- generational lens
- advocate
- witness
- hold space

what else?



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Rural and Indigenous Birthing People in Alaska

*Context and
Perspective

Birthright

We envision sovereignty for Alaska Native people from our first breaths on Earth, through the reclamation of our power during rites of passage that are rooted in ancestral knowledge and each birthing person being surrounded by their community, in connection to their sacred lands and waters.



Birth is Ceremony

“Birthing is an extremely physical and spiritual act that requires endurance, determination, concentration, and yet a certain surrender to the natural process. Birth, like Native ceremonies, requires preparation of body and spirit, a preparation of physical space, entering into an unknown dimension that is largely not “controllable” by human intervention.

...Certain ceremonies are like birth in that they can require great bodily and spiritual sacrifice such as going without sleep or food, physical exertion and commitment to the end. A ceremony or ritual usually entails offering, giving thanks, and a state of being that shows humility and sometimes sacrifices, such as an all-night prayer vigil or the Sun Dance tradition, which emulates the pain of birthing women.”

- *from her book ‘Red Medicine: Traditional Indigenous Rites of Birthing and Healing,’ Dr. Patrisia Gonzales, Kickapoo/ Comanche/ Macehual, traditional birth attendant*



First Environment

“An original sacred instruction is that woman is the first environment. In pregnancy, women’s bodies sustain life. Their unborn see through the mother’s eyes and hear through her ears. Everything the mother feels, the baby feels too. At the breast of women, the generations are nourished. From the bodies of women flows the relationship of those generations both to society and to the natural world.”

- *Tekatsi' tsiah:khwa Katsi Cook (Wolf Clan), Elder Mohawk grandmother and midwife*



Rites of Passage

The way we care for ourselves and are cared for during key transitions will affect lifelong health.

“In order for a person to be whole, they must feed their mind, body, and spirit equally to heal themselves.”

- *Rita Blumenstein, Tribal Doctor*

Spirit - Spiritual wellness

Body - Physical wellness

Mind - Mental wellness

Heart - Emotional wellness



Healing Generations

“We are our ancestors.
When we can heal ourselves,
we heal our ancestors, our
grandmothers, grandfathers,
and our children.

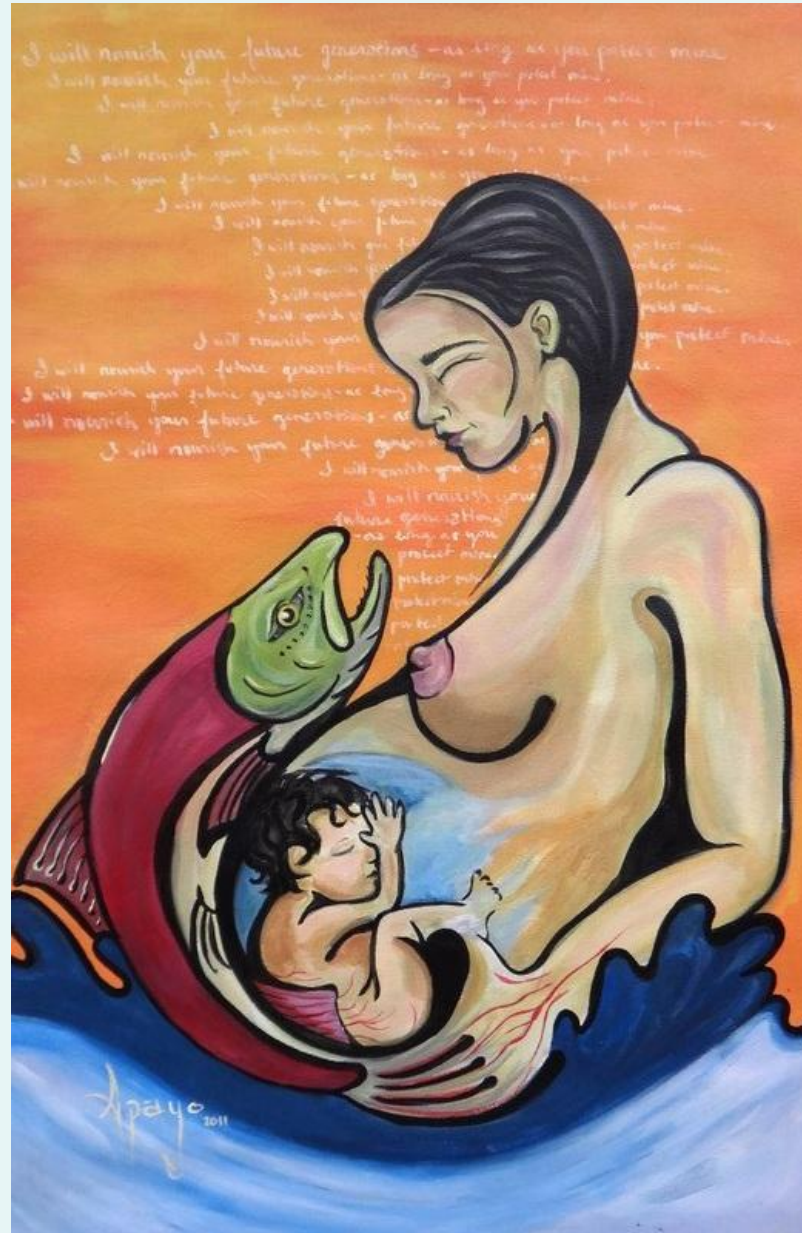
When we heal ourselves
we heal Mother Earth.”

— *Rita Pitka Blumenstein,
Yup'ik Tribal Doctor and
Traditional Midwife*

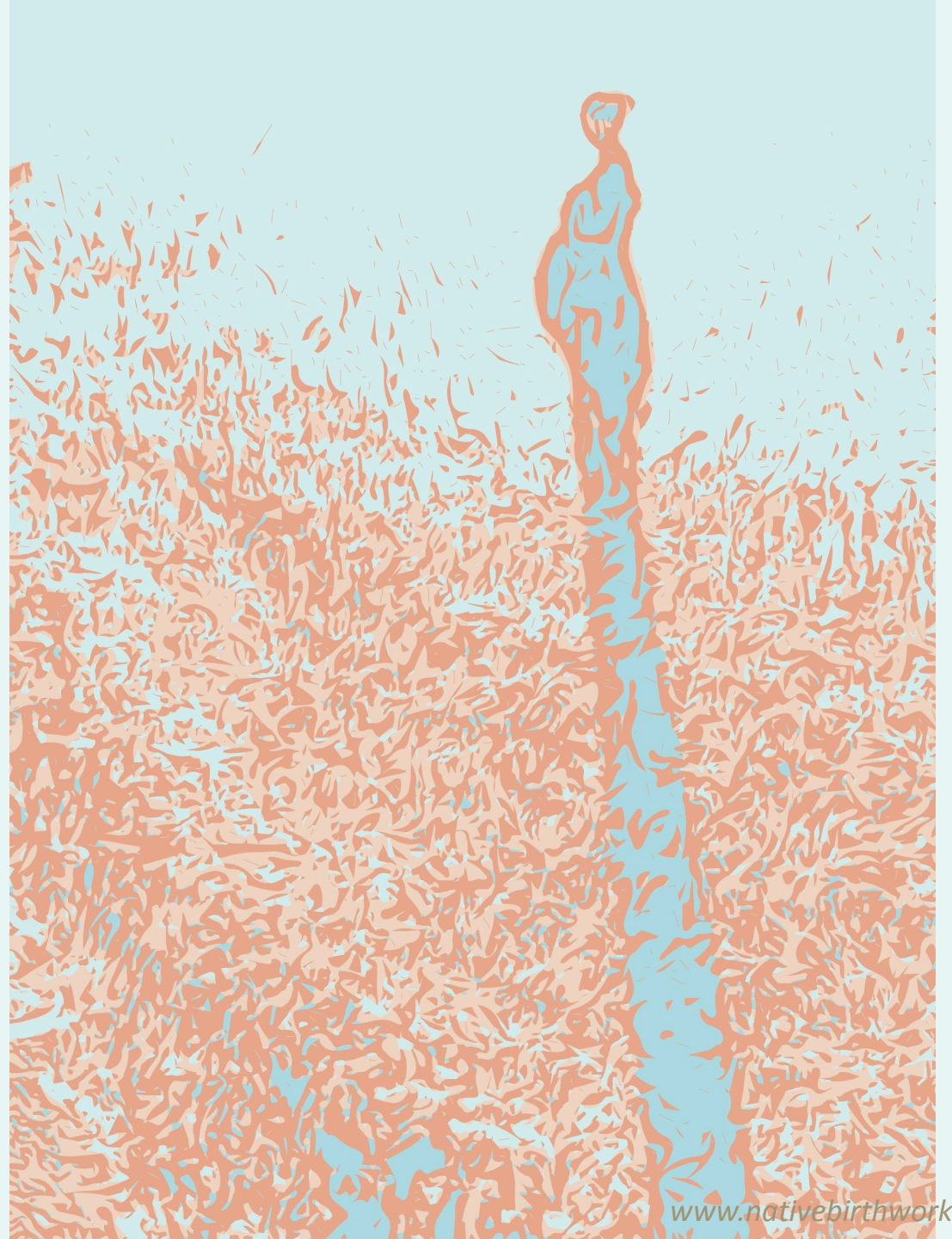


Reciprocity

OUR AGREEMENT:
I WILL NOURISH
YOUR FUTURE
GENERATIONS -
AS LONG AS YOU
PROTECT MINE.



Disparities don't mean
something is wrong with
us, it means there is
something wrong with
the systems we live in.



Birth work is social justice work



Urban Indian Dictionary

Health Equity

[Health Eq-ui-ty] /hɛlθ ɛkwəti/ n.

1. recognizes we have the answers to solve health disparities—they are carried in our stories, our land, and our DNA. Only when this knowledge is incorporated and valued will we begin to achieve health equity.



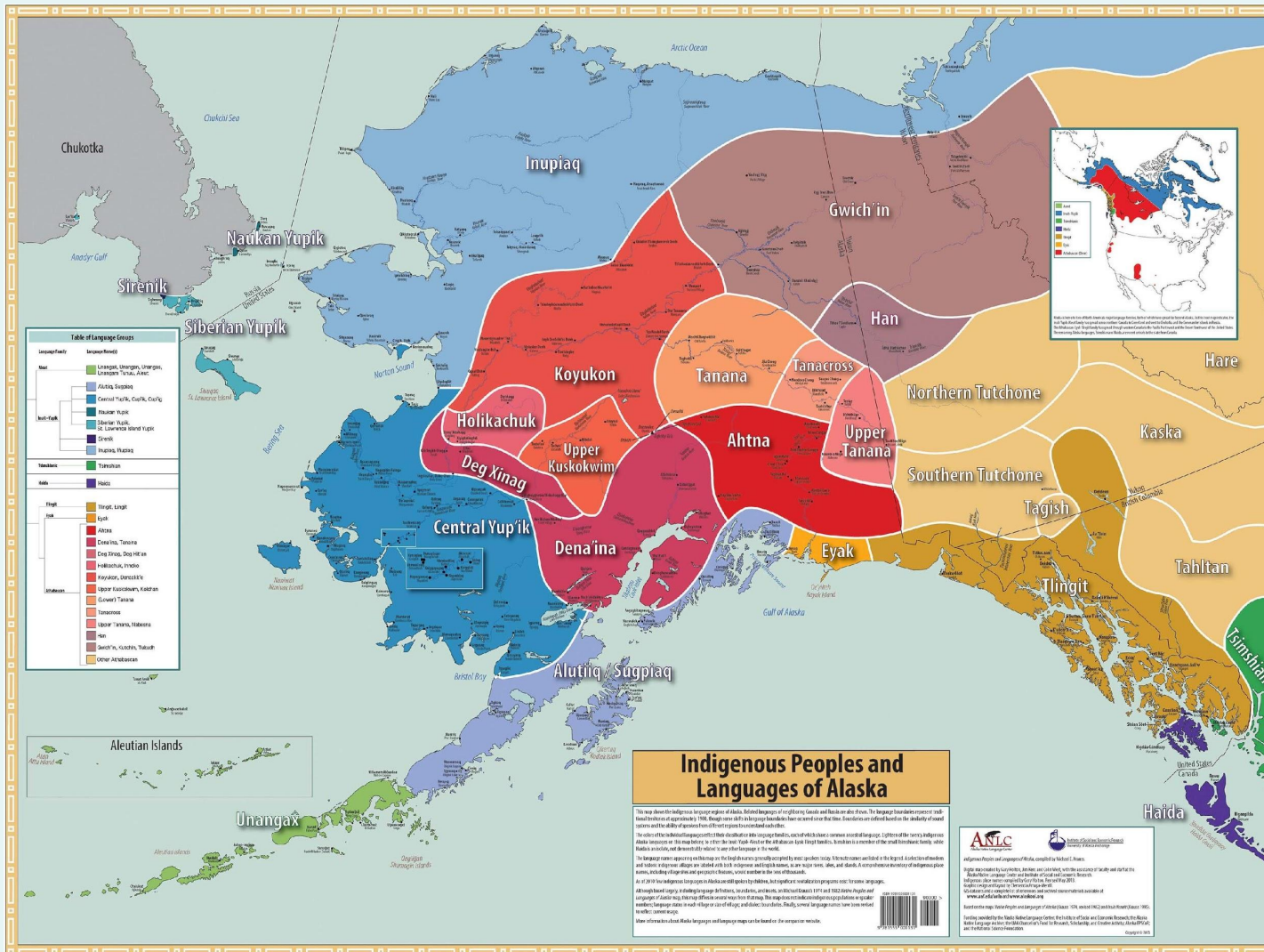
Urban Indian Dictionary

Historical Healing

[His-tor-i-cal Heal-ing] /hɪstɔrɪkəl hiːlɪŋ/ n.

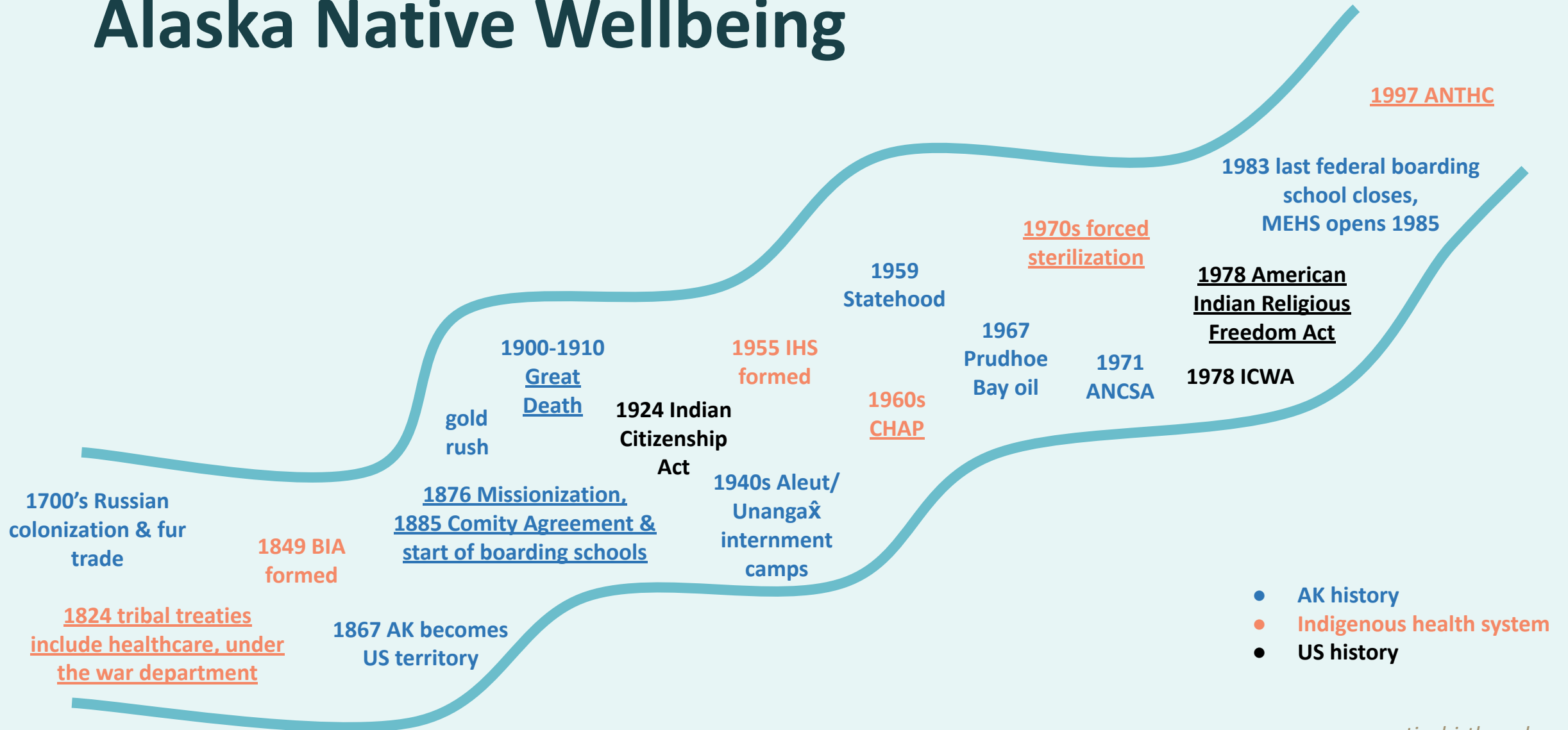
1. gathering the pieces broken by historical trauma and stitching them back together in bold, beautiful, intricate patterns of strength and resiliency.

Brief overview of Indigenous Peoples in Alaska



- 229 Recognized Alaska Native tribes
- 20 Indigenous languages as official state languages
- Approximately 200,000 Alaska Native and American Indian people in Alaska are eligible to receive care through the tribal health system, with 40% living in the Southcentral region (Homer to Talkeetna)

Structural Impacts on Alaska Native Wellbeing



Alaska midwives through history



Alaska State Library - Historical Collections

“Midwife at work, Savoonga, 1940’s”



Alaska State Library - Historical Collections

“Midwife training, 1951”

How colonization has shaped where we birth



Sign on wall states "DO NOT SPEAK ESKIMO"

Traditional midwives were re-trained into non-Native medical healthcare systems

Evacuation policies → all births were/are removed from villages

Many rural Alaskans cannot receive perinatal healthcare or birth with any medical support in their communities.

How colonialism has shaped maternity care



Della Keats (Puyuaq), Inupiaq midwife and traditional healer from near Noatak, 1952

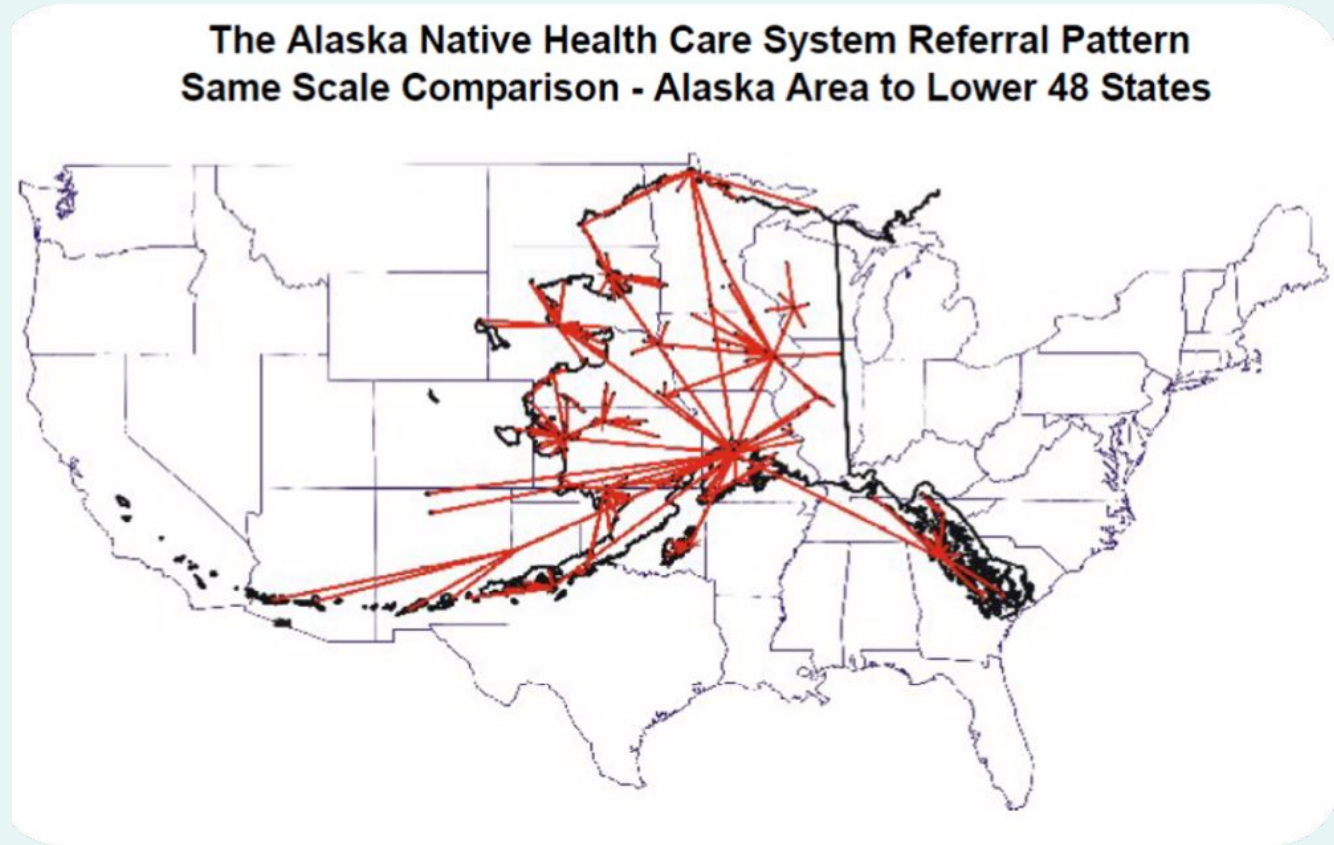
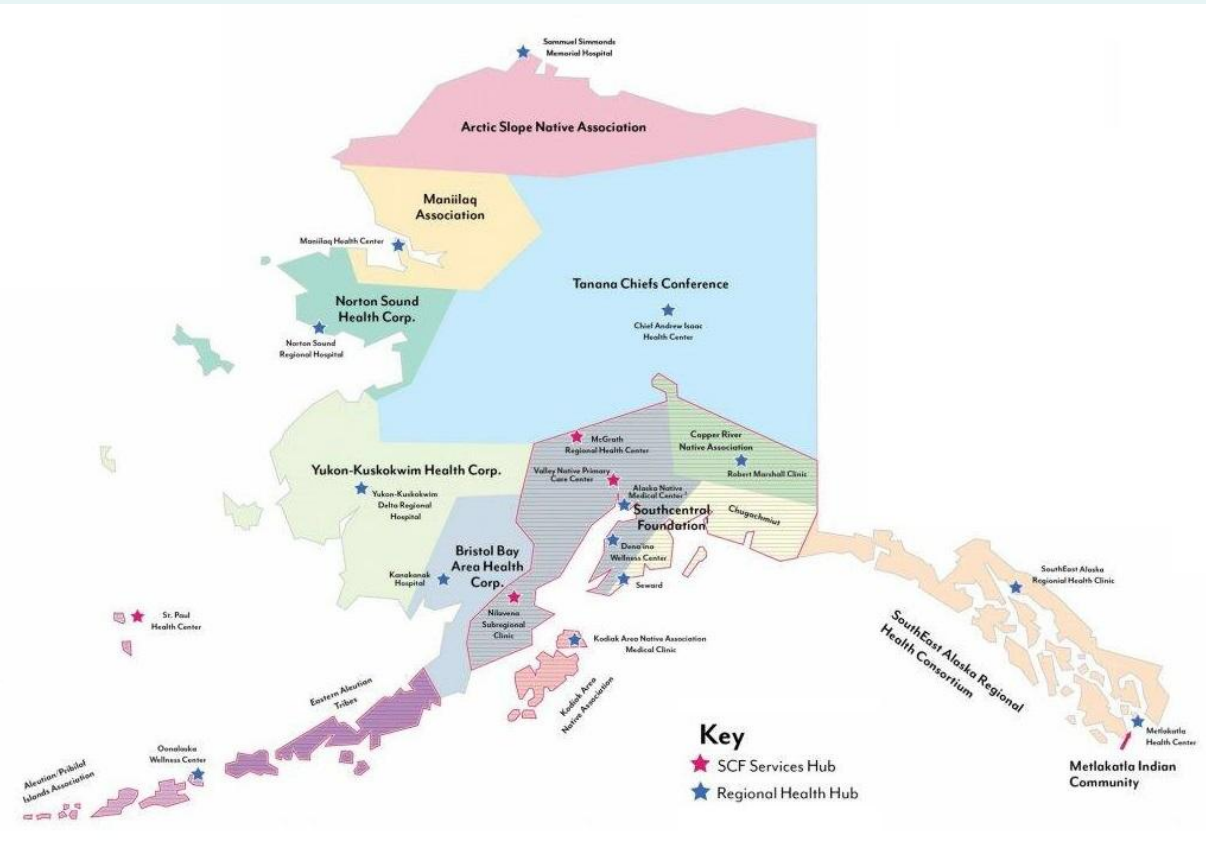
Our traditional roles and knowledge were inferiorized when new models of healthcare were introduced, and traditional roles and knowledge are not passed on.

Pregnancy, birth, and postpartum care is routinely referred out of rural communities, away from support systems, traditions, and cultural practices.

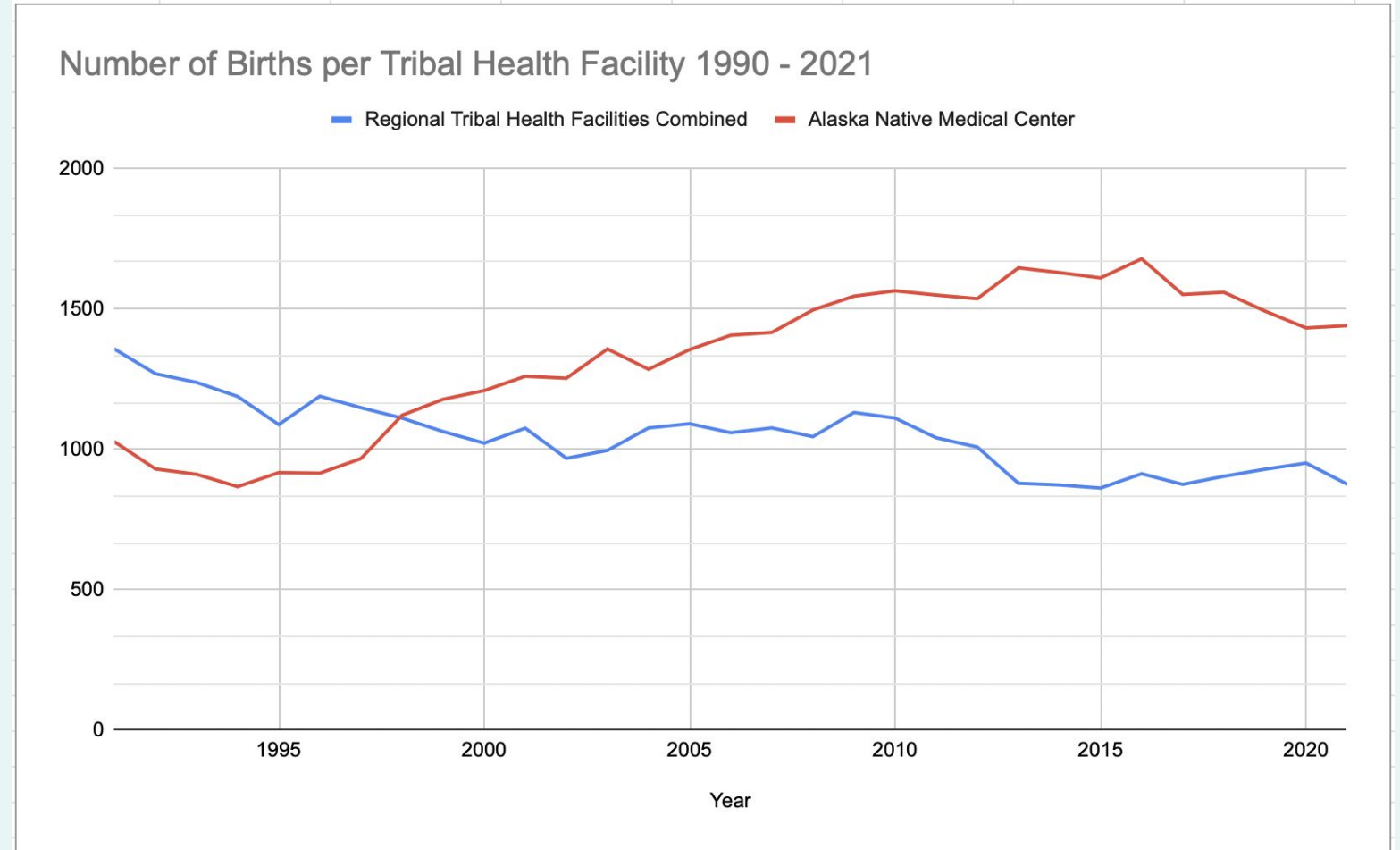
When rural and Alaska Native women are removed from their homes for extended periods of time, they cannot fill essential roles, which are inherent to the stability and prosperity of their communities.

(see UN Dept of Economic and Social Affairs for more)

Where Alaska Native people birth



Where Alaska Native people birth



Source: Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics, July 2022

Quick overview of birthing as a rural person



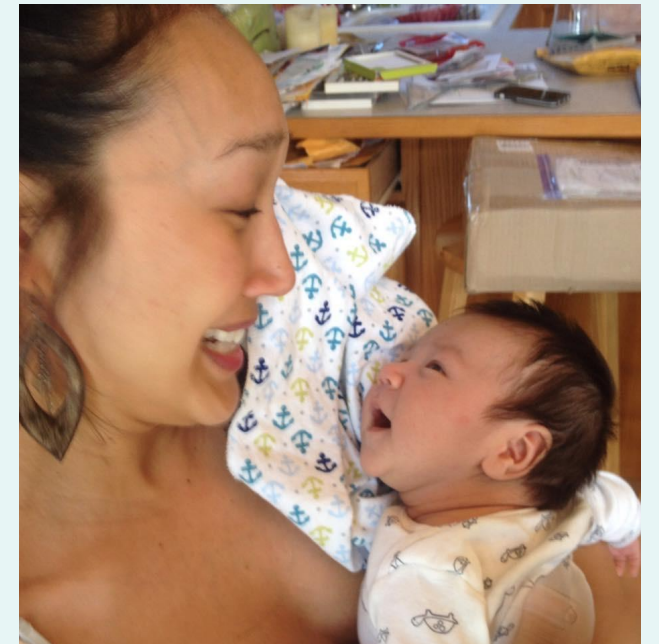


Birth for Alaska Native people is almost always in a hospital setting, usually away from their own community, traditions, and practices

Evacuation is mandatory for rural pregnant people

What can we do to support Alaska Native birthing families?

- Become familiar with cultures and histories
- Become familiar with structural impacts
- Trauma informed/healing centered care
- Traditions as best practices
- Community-based solutions
- Cultural safety



Cultural Safety



Free online introductory course through Frontier Nursing University
3 CEUs, taught by Objibwe midwife Doreen Day and CNM Dr. Erin Tenney

Extends beyond cultural awareness, sensitivity, and skills-based competencies and is predicated on understanding the power differentials inherent in health care service delivery to redress these inequities...

- **It is consumers or patients who decide whether they feel safe with the care that has been given**
- Places an emphasis on the healthcare worker understanding their own culture and identity, and how this manifests in their practice.
- Aims to directly **address the effects of colonialism** within the dominant health system by focusing on the level of cultural safety felt by an individual seeking health care. The **responsibility** to recognize and protect a person's cultural identity (and hence maintain their cultural safety) **lies with the health service**.
- Emphasis is placed on assisting the healthcare worker to understand processes of identity and culture, and how power imbalances or relationships can be culturally unsafe (and thus, detrimental to a person's health and wellbeing)
- It is underpinned by a **social justice framework** and requires individuals to undertake a process of **constant self-reflection**.
- Cultural safety is, therefore, a holistic and shared approach, where all individuals feel safe, can undertake learning together with dignity, and demonstrate deep listening

<https://ceu.catalog.instructure.com/courses/introduction2cultural-safety>.

Questions to consider

Who decides our birth options?

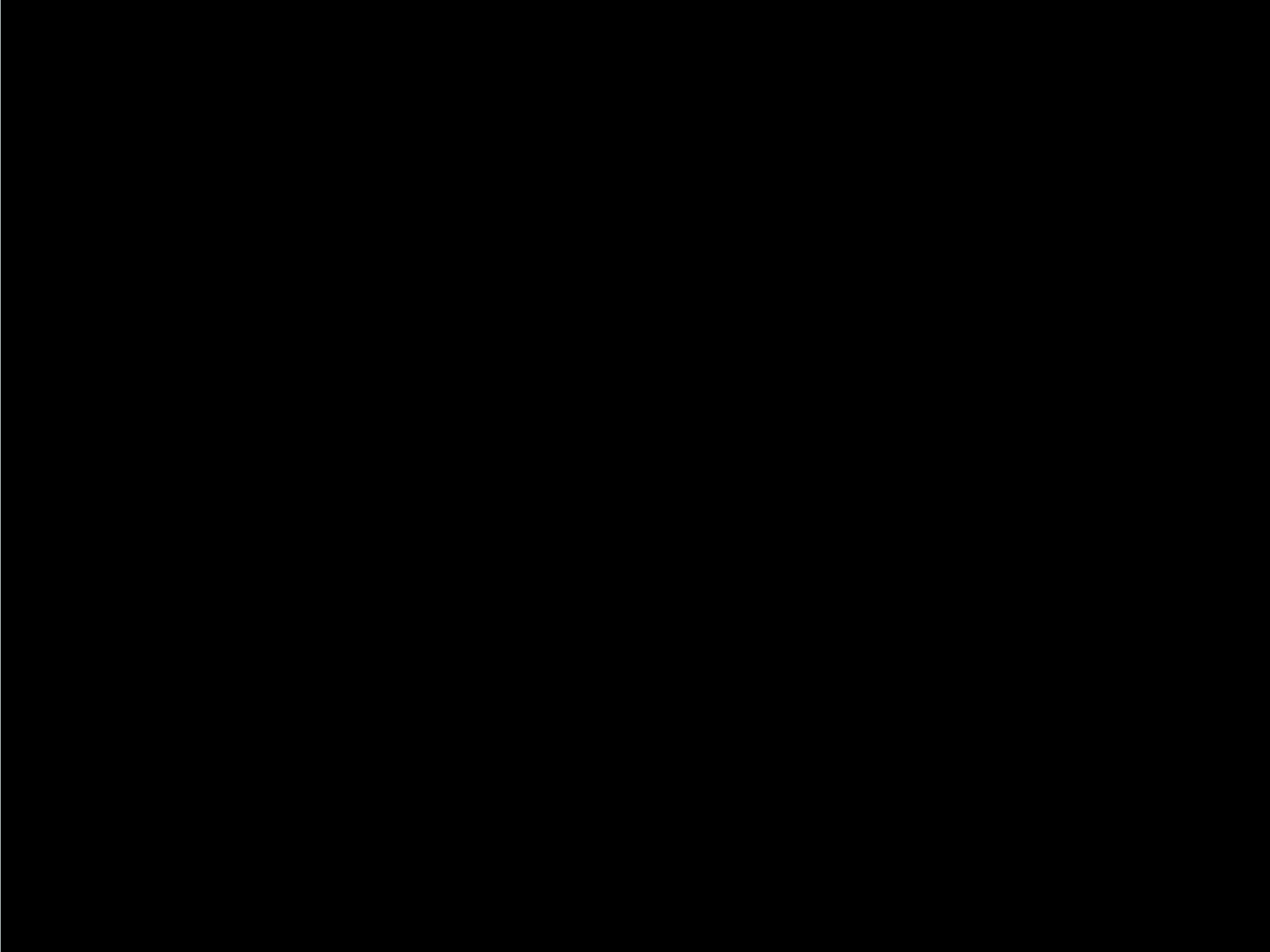
How does the way we birth impact maternal, child, family, and community health?

What do these choices mean for growing families?



Rematriation





Connect with us

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learn more and read testimonials
from families we've supported*

Email: nativebirthworker@gmail.com

*Facebook: Alaska Native Birthworkers
Community*

Instagram: @alaskanativebirthworkers



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