

PATRICIA SMITH
INTERIM PRESIDENT AND CEO
YUKON-KUSKOKWIM HEALTH CORPORATION

U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS

Legislative Field Hearing titled, “From Disaster to Resilience: Strengthening Tribal Communities through Federal Response, Mitigation and Relocation Programs” located in Bethel, Alaska.

May 6, 2026

Good afternoon Chairman Murkowski and members of the committee. I am Patricia Smith, Interim President and CEO of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation (YKHC). Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this matter.

YKHC is a tribal health organization of 58 federally-recognized Alaska Native tribes which was formed to administer a comprehensive health care delivery system for the communities of the Yukon-Kuskokwim region. For more than fifty years, we have provided health care services to the people of the region under a Self-Governance Compact with the Indian Health Service under Title V of the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act.

YKHC serves a remote, isolated service area approximately the size of the State of Oregon. This region is the traditional home to Alaska’s indigenous Yup’ik, Cup’ik, and Athabascan people, and is not connected to the road system. As of the 2020 Census, over 80% of the residents of the region are Alaska Native, many of whom speak the Yup’ik or Cup’ik language at home and follow a subsistence lifestyle.

YKHC provides a wide variety of community, social, and population health services to the approximately 30,000 residents of the region. Our health system includes 42 village clinics, 5 subregional clinics, a regional hospital, and other programs, services, functions, and activities.

A. Background: Response to Disasters and Emergencies is a YKHC Service.

It is very challenging to respond to disasters and emergencies in a remote area, off the road system, with varying degrees of infrastructure and environmental conditions. Tribal Health Organizations in Alaska, with a physical presence, deep-rooted knowledge of the region, and on-the-ground expertise, play a critical role in the immediate response to disasters and emergencies while federal, state, and other emergency management and support entities mobilize.

Over the past 15 years, YKHC has developed the plans, resources, and infrastructure to respond immediately to disasters and emergencies. We have responded to more than a dozen

emergencies that were declared state and federal disasters, along with numerous additional local emergencies.

For example, in 2011, a flood during break-up season on the Kuskokwim River caused major devastation in Crooked Creek. After responding to this disaster, YKHC developed a regional response plan that was later adopted by partner agencies to improve coordination in future events. YKHC also co-led the establishment of a Regional Resource Coordination Committee, modeled after the Local Emergency Planning Committee (LEPC) framework used in organized boroughs across Alaska. This effort brought together partners including the Association of Village Council Presidents, Inc. (AVCP), AVCP Rural Housing Authority (AVCP RHA), Lower Kuskokwim School District (LKSD), Lower Yukon School District (LYSD), the City of Bethel (COB), and others.

In 2015, YKHC provided medical support, evacuated 44 individuals, and led shelter operations at the National Guard Armory in Bethel in response to the Middle Kuskokwim wildfires. In 2022, we did the same for 100 displaced individuals in the 2022 East Fork wildfires in the Yukon River area.

YKHC is also the primary response agency for water and sewer-related emergencies in the region. Communities frequently contact YKHC Rural Maintenance Workers (RMWs) directly for assistance, and when local governments request support through the State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC), YKHC typically is the first call for water and sewer issues.

In 2015, YKHC initiated and led a rapid response to repair the fire-damaged vacuum sewer building and restore sewer service at the Emmonak water treatment plant. This prevented catastrophic failure of the water distribution and wastewater collection systems serving around 1,000 residents, avoiding millions of dollars in damage.

Also in 2015, YKHC led response and recovery efforts to repair distribution and hydronic heating systems damaged in the Cheformak Pump House fire, which restored water service to the school and clinic.

In 2021, YKHC coordinated an interagency response in Tuluksak after the community's water plant, its only source of potable water, was destroyed by fire. This included establishing a temporary treatment system in the school, deploying a temporary community water treatment plant and storage tank owned by YKHC from Bethel to Tuluksak, and setting up a washeteria for community use until a permanent replacement was completed this year.

In learning from these experiences, YKHC now maintains a constant state of readiness for responding to disasters and emergencies, which includes an around-the-clock internal notification system and stockpiles of necessary supplies such as pallets of bottled water and ready-to-eat meals, home muck out kits, and homeowner educational materials.

B. YKHC's Immediate Response to the Typhoon Halong Disaster Emergency.

The disaster emergency caused by Typhoon Halong developed just after midnight on Sunday, October 12, 2024. That morning, as news of the widespread and devastating impacts emerged, YKHC immediately stood up its incident command team. We helped the U.S. Coast Guard and Alaska National Guard evacuate injured and vulnerable individuals; dispatched medical teams to affected villages to triage, provide medical care, and prioritize high-risk patient transport; deployed maintenance and construction teams to restore and stabilize critical water and wastewater services; provided 26,000 bottles of water, 12,000 meals, 1500 hygiene supplies, and emergency medications to people sheltering in Bethel and impacted villages; coordinated with federal, state, tribal, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and established an Emergency Operations Center at the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta Regional Hospital in Bethel; set-up, supplied, and supported temporary shelters at various locations including the National Guard Armory in Bethel; and chartered more than 50 flights in a coordinated effort to transport over 1000 displaced individuals and responders.

Much of this immediate response occurred within the first week after the disaster and demonstrates the importance of planning, preparedness, infrastructure, and on-the-ground local resources. By the end of October, over 600 evacuees were moved to hotels and non-congregate lodging in Anchorage and elsewhere, while hundreds more were taken in by families and friends. The success of this immediate response was made possible by the coordinated efforts of federal, state, tribal organizations, and NGOs, including the members of the Alaska SEOC, the Alaska Division of Forestry and the Department of Transportation, the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), AVCP, AVCP RHA, the American Red Cross, City of Bethel, LKSD, Bethel Friends of Canines, Samaritan's Purse, Team Rubicon, World Central Kitchen, Municipality of Anchorage, the Alaska Native Tribal Health Corporation, and many others.

C. Ongoing Rebuilding and Resiliency Efforts.

YKHC continues to provide medical care, case management, and behavioral health support for more than 230 displaced residents living in Bethel, approximately 50 displaced individuals living with relatives in surrounding communities, approximately 50 residents who have returned to Kipnuk, and approximately 50 residents who have returned to Kwigillingok. In addition, we are working with ANTHC, Southcentral Foundation, the State of Alaska, and the Municipality of Anchorage to help provide ongoing support for the approximately 1,000 displaced residents living in non-congregate shelter locations in Anchorage.

YKHC also continues to repair and rebuild infrastructure in the region. Village clinics in Kwigillingok and Kipnuk are undergoing repair and preparing to reopen this summer. We have developed a plan for the community of Kongiganak to restore the raw water transmission line, which is a critical component of the public water system for the school and community. We are

working closely with the Kipnuk Tribe and ANTHC to develop short and medium-term plans to treat water at the community water treatment plant, and we are advocating for the development of a long-term plan that incorporates funding from the comprehensive piped project under the Bi-Partisan Infrastructure Law. We are working with the Kwigillingok school and the community to coordinate efforts to address the wastewater spill at the school and water treatment system, and we are tracking other critical water and sewer projects, including water treatment plant repairs in Napaskiak and floodwater mitigation efforts in Nightmute.

D. Recommendations and Conclusion.

As we reflect on the progress that has been made, we recognize that recovery will require significant additional work and resources. Approximately 1,200 residents remain displaced, including over 1000 who are living outside the region. Public infrastructure and homes in many communities need repair. Federal and state agencies, tribes, tribal organizations, and others will need to continue to collaborate closely to help communities develop short, medium, and long-term strategies to return to the region.

At this stage, YKHC recommends FEMA:

- Extend emergency housing winterization stabilization
- Increase funding for permanent housing construction
- Approve the mass claim for permanent housing construction so repairs can be coordinated efficiently
- Eliminate cost-share requirements for Tribal public infrastructure in public assistance applications

YKHC will continue to support our partners and participate in the ongoing recovery efforts until the job is done. Typhoon Halong caused large-scale infrastructure failure across our region, and trauma, loss, and displacement to our people. Dignity demands that every displaced person has access to lodging, financial resources, healthcare, and the opportunity to recover. Qu yana for the opportunity and honor to provide testimony today.

Sincerely,

YUKON-KUSKOKWIM HEALTH CORP.


Patricia Smith, Interim President and CEO