

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Community Needs Assessment



Community Needs Assessment: Family Environments

Overview

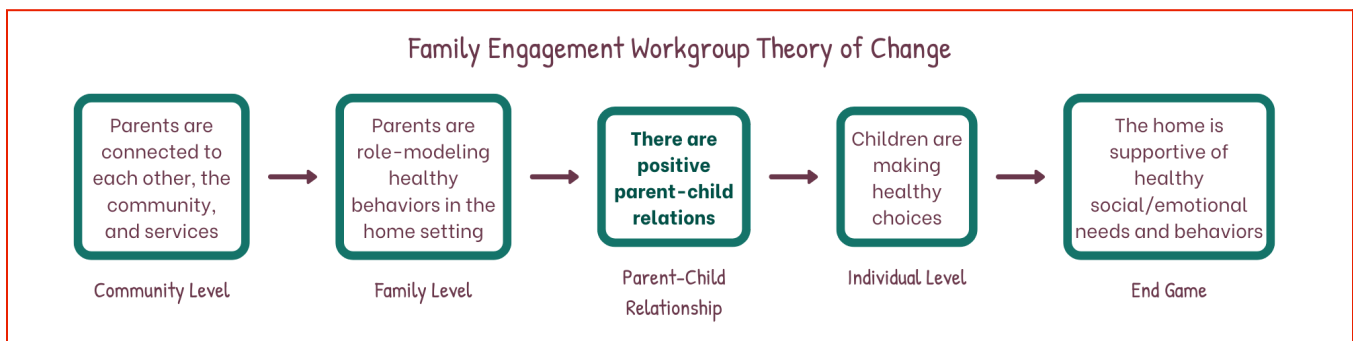
The Pathways to a Safer Sitka Coalition is a group of local agencies and individuals working together to create a healthier, more equitable community. We aim to reduce negative health outcomes, such as domestic violence, substance use, and suicide by building equitable, accessible, and culturally-responsive services and systems. This Community Needs Assessment (CNA) was developed to compile current data regarding the health of the Sitka community to determine focus points for the Pathways Coalition moving forward within each of its goal areas: school environments, youth leadership, male engagement, family engagement, and community environments.

Data collection was a collaborative effort between coalition members. This involved several methods, including focused conversations with members in the Sitka Youth Leadership Committee (youth coalition), the Family Engagement Workgroup (subcommittee of the community coalition), and the Pathways Steering Committee (community prevention coalition). Additionally, six members from the coalition worked together in a subcommittee to determine the secondary data needed, sources to review, and to divvy out roles for collecting, analyzing, and compiling this data. For additional context about Sitka, the methodology, and its limitations, please refer to [this document](#).

The focus in this section is family engagement, which is reflective of Pathways' fourth goal: Social service and community agencies have increased the extent to which they promote and foster healthy social-emotional environments.

Key Findings

The Pathways Coalition recognizes family connectedness and a healthy home environment as vital to a child's well being and potential for healthy growth and development. As social service agencies and individuals in the community, we know that when a child grows up in a home where there is family conflict, negative parent/child relationships, an absent parent, financial stress, and other adversities such as abuse and neglect, that child is much more at risk for negative health outcomes later in life. In Sitka, the Pathways Coalition has identified family connectedness as a shared protective factor, and within the Pathways Family Engagement Workgroup (FEW), uses it as a focal point to collectively mobilize around. Additionally, the Pathways Coalition identified family strengthening as a goal within the community

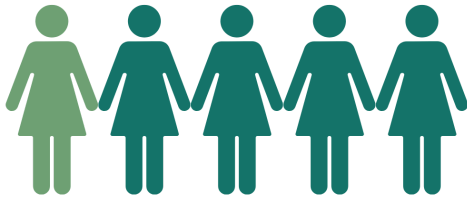


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prevention plan, which aims to see an increase in social services and providers who support and foster healthy social-emotional parenting.

Like many social issues in the state, Alaska's rates of child abuse are high. According to the Child Advocacy Center through Sitka Tribe of Alaska in Sitka, 37 forensic interviews of youth were conducted due to disclosed abuse between September 2021 and July 2023. In Southeast Alaska, the Office of Children's Services (OCS) reports that in the year 2023, 654 initial assessments were conducted for child abuse and of those, 167 cases were substantiated after initial assessment. The Children's Bureau shows that in 2023, there were 2,424 child maltreatment victims statewide, whereas in 2022, there were 2,581 victims. Despite this decrease from 2022

One in Five Alaska Women Experienced IPV in 2020

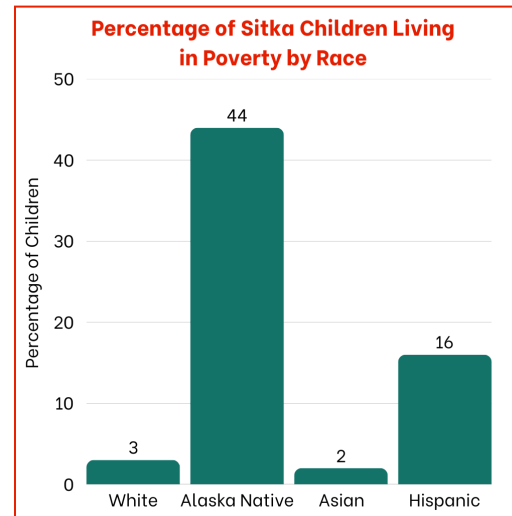


to 2023, Alaska still ranks in the top five states for high rates of child victimization with 14.6 children who were victims of substantiated or indicated maltreatment for every 1,000 children (America's Health Rankings, 2023).

Growing up in a home where children are exposed to violence further puts them at risk for negative health outcomes as they mature into adolescents and adults. In FY23, SAFV alone provided

residential services to 40 adults and 15 children, totaling 3,422 bednights. Additionally, SAFV received and responded to 881 crisis calls, and provided 162 individuals with non-residential services.¹ In Alaska, 70% of women have experienced intimate partner violence (psychological aggression, coercive control and entrapment, and/or physical violence) in their lifetime. About 20% of Alaska women experienced intimate partner violence (IPV) in 2020 alone (University of Alaska Anchorage, 2020). Alaska remains high in rates of intimate partner violence compared to the nation, as mentioned in other sections under the Key Findings.

Financial instability also puts undue stress on families and negatively impacts the home environment, in particular, the relationships between parents as well as how parents or guardians relate to their children. In Alaska, children whose parents lack secure employment is 32%; children living in households with a high housing cost burden is 28%, and children living in poverty is 14% (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2024). In Sitka, the number of children living in poverty by race is as follows: 3%



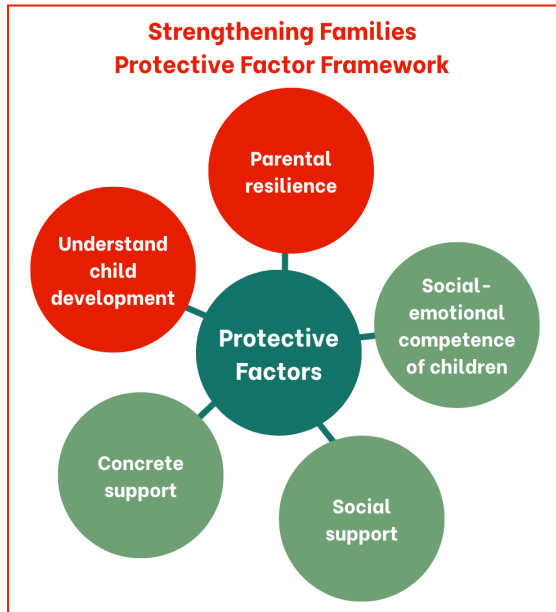
¹ As of FY24, SAFV provided residential services to 48 adults and 16 children, totaling 6,219 bednights. Additionally, they received and responded to 294 crisis calls, and provided 104 individuals with non-residential services.



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white, 44% Native American/Alaska Native, 2% Asian, and 16% Hispanic (University of Wisconsin, 2023). Additionally, the Sitka School District reports that 35.5% of students enrolled in the district were eligible for free and reduced lunches which indicates the percentage of families who are low income in the community² (Sitka School District, 2023).

The [Strengthening Families Protective Factor Framework](#) offers insight as to what specifically sets families up for a healthy home environment, prevents child abuse and neglect, and helps families feel supported.



The five protective factors at the foundation of this strengthening-families model include: concrete supports in times of need, social connections, social-emotional competence in children, parental resilience, and knowledge in parenting and child development.

Conversations that take place at home between guardians and children regarding what the child is learning at school or after school is an indicator of family connectedness. In Sitka, 99% of parents who took the SCCS responded favorably to the question, “how often do you have conversations with your child about what they are learning at school” (79% said daily, 18% said weekly); 80% responded favorably to the question, “how often do you connect activities that you do at home with what your child is learning at school

(20% daily, 36% weekly, 24% 1-2 times/month), whereas close to 20% make minimal connections to what they are learning at school or none at all. In regard to how often parents/guardians have conversations with their child about career or college preparation, 62% responded favorably, (8% daily, 21% weekly, 32% 1-2 times/month), but close to 40% have minimal conversations or none at all regarding post-secondary opportunities (AASB, 2023).³

The Pathways Family Engagement Workgroup (FEW), which began in 2016, works to coordinate efforts aimed at helping families to be more connected to their community and to each other. Since 2021, FEW has implemented an activity series called the Sheet’ká Family Challenge which provides free and fun events for families over a 12-week period each spring. In the spring of 2023, 78 families registered for the

² As of 2024, 31% of students enrolled in the district were eligible for free and reduced lunches, however, two-thirds of families did not apply; the percentage of families who are eligible is likely higher. SSD intends to do an outreach campaign to reach and enroll more eligible families. In the school year 2025/2026, 34% of SSD students were eligible.

³ SCCS data from 2024 shows similar results.



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Challenge with 143 youth and 162 adults participating in activities and in 2022, approximately 66 families registered for the Challenge. Results from the 2022 post Challenge parent survey (completed by 23 parents/guardians) showed that 65% of families reported spending more time together and 35% said they engaged in more conversation with their child as a result of participating in Challenge activities. Parents reported that being outdoors, interacting with other families, meeting new people, and spending time together were some of their favorite moments of the Challenge. One parent shared,



“These events really help our family feel connected to our community. Without this connection to Sitka, we might otherwise choose to move to where we are closer to relatives and the cost of living and affordable housing are more accessible.”

The 2023 parent survey results have also been analyzed and show similar results in support of the workgroup’s goals of increasing connections among family members and access to family-oriented opportunities. Notable quotes from the 2023 parent survey include:

“Trying new activities creates a special bond between me and my family”; “These Challenges are important to my family because they help introduce young kids to the many opportunities for growth, connection, and learning within our community”; and “[These activities] make it affordable to do things.”

FEW engaged in a gap analysis in the spring of 2023 to assess the gaps in the community in terms of the community’s family engagement efforts. Using the Strengthening Families Protective Factor Framework as a reference and guide for discussion, FEW determined that Sitka is doing a good job initiating opportunities for social connections by coordinating efforts like the Challenge. Additionally, the workgroup identified numerous efforts offered by agencies in

What We Learned: Protective Factors
Sitka is lacking in two areas of the Strengthening Families Protective Factor Framework

- Social Connections
- Concrete support in times of need
- Social and emotional competence of children

- ★ **Parental Resilience**
- ★ **Knowledge of parenting and child development**



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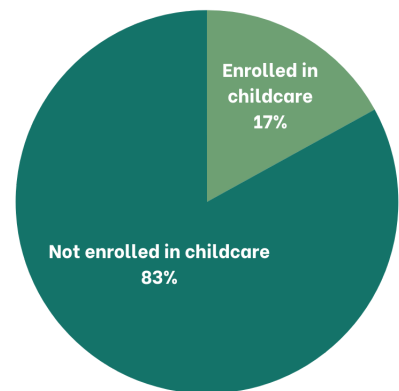
Sitka to provide food and other basic needs for families who are struggling, particularly during the COVID pandemic (concrete support in times of need), as well as efforts that support social-emotional competence in children. The two areas that surfaced during this process and indicated a gap in coordinated efforts were around parental resilience and knowledge in parenting and child development.

There are several parent-focused courses offered in Sitka each year, providing opportunities for parents to develop parenting skills and learn how to best engage with their child. One program called, Circle of Security, is implemented twice a year by Center for Community's Early Learning Program in partnership with the Sitka School District and Sitka Counseling. This evidence-based program is for parents of children up to age 5 and helps parents meet their child's emotional needs (Circle of Security, 2023). In 2022, the program had a small pool of participants with only 10 individuals enrolled between the two eight-week sessions. In 2021, there were 22 participants total, and pre-COVID there were approximately 8 participants per session (total 16), indicating a fairly small pool of parents and guardians taking advantage of this resource. Additionally, 40-50% of participants are required or highly encouraged by Office of Children's Services (OCS) to participate in this program, meaning there are very few parents voluntarily opting in. There are other parenting opportunities offered in the community, such as Sitka Tribe of Alaska's Fatherhood/Motherhood is Sacred, which are both offered 1-2 times a year and enroll 2-4 participants per session. Though a handful of opportunities are offered each year for parents/guardians to build their skills and knowledge as caregivers, it is clear participation is minimal suggesting parents/guardians may be too busy, overwhelmed, or simply lack the capacity/means to engage.

Providing support for parents to gain knowledge in skills in parenting and child development rose up as a need to address in our community. Additionally, the gap analysis conducted by FEW revealed that supporting parental resilience is another need and area to address going forward. Some efforts to support parental resilience have occurred in past years, but nothing has been sustainable.

Additionally, lack of childcare in Sitka came up at the Pathways Steering Committee meeting as another area of concern around the family goal; however, another group, the Early Childhood Coalition, is making progress in this area. Sitka's Early Childhood Coalition (ECC) discovered through their assessment in March of 2023 that 8 daycare and preschools exist in Sitka with 170 children between 2 months and 5 years old enrolled. The ECC estimates that there are over 1000 children in this age range in Sitka. Two of the preschools (3-5 years) had openings in March for half days only, while all of the others had no vacancies. Additionally, childcare workers are

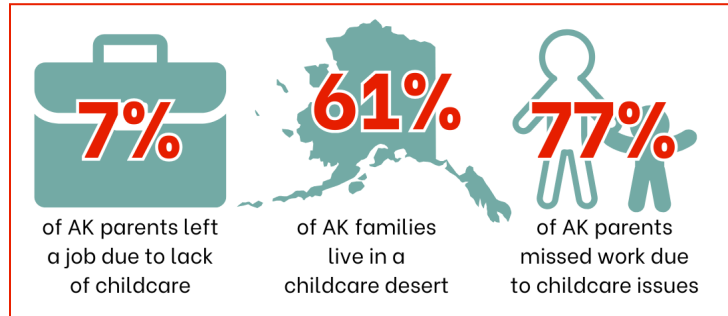
Percentage of Total Sitka Children Under Age 5 Enrolled in Childcare



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paid a mediocre wage, contributing to understaffed facilities and a limit to how many children agencies can take in.

In Alaska, the US Chamber of Commerce Foundation (2021) found that 7% of parents left a job due to lack of childcare availability, 77% of parents missed work due to childcare issues, and 61% of Alaskan families live in a childcare desert. The annual cost of childcare in Alaska is more than the annual tuition and fees at UAA, UAS, and UAF. As a result, parents are leaving the workforce to stay home with young children (Child Care Coalition of Alaska, 2023). The ECC concluded that more licensed facilities in Sitka that can take infants and toddlers are needed, as well as preschool-aged children. Building the industry of workers in Sitka to allow existing facilities to operate at higher capacity is also another need.⁴ The ECC is the primary driver working with the city to move things forward in the area of childcare needs in Sitka; therefore, Pathways will continue to support their efforts as necessary.



Recommendations

Families do best when they have their basic needs met, engage socially, have positive connections among family members, have support and respite, and utilize

effective parenting strategies while engaging with their children. The Family Engagement Workgroup identified two areas of need during their gap analysis discussion to better support families. One is supporting parental resilience, and the other is connecting families with parenting resources and information on child development. In Sitka, there are minimal opportunities for parents/guardians to access helpful resources for parenting their children. There are two known courses offered throughout the year, but participation is low and some parents are mandated to attend by OCS. One potential solution is to work with parents/guardians to determine what resources they would like as well as how they would like to acquire those resources. Additionally, community partners could work together to integrate parent



⁴ Xóots Yadi, a tuition-based preschool program through Sitka School District, was piloted in 2025. State and tribal childcare subsidies help fund this program.



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resources into other settings (e.g., parent/teacher conferences, integrating information via program newsletters sent home, family dialogues offered by the school). Another area of concern impacting families is the lack of affordable and accessible childcare in Sitka. A separate community coalition has made this need a priority and focus of their work, therefore the Pathways Coalition will support efforts to address this issue but not be the primary driver.

Needs Statement

Goal 4a. Family Engagement - *Work with parents/guardians to establish community opportunities that build parental knowledge and skill in their children's development, as well as increase parental resilience. Ensure that families have equal access to these opportunities as well as other family engagement opportunities in Sitka.*



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