

# MALE ENGAGEMENT

## Community Needs Assessment



Finalized 2026

Sitka, Alaska

## Community Needs Assessment: Male Engagement

### Overview

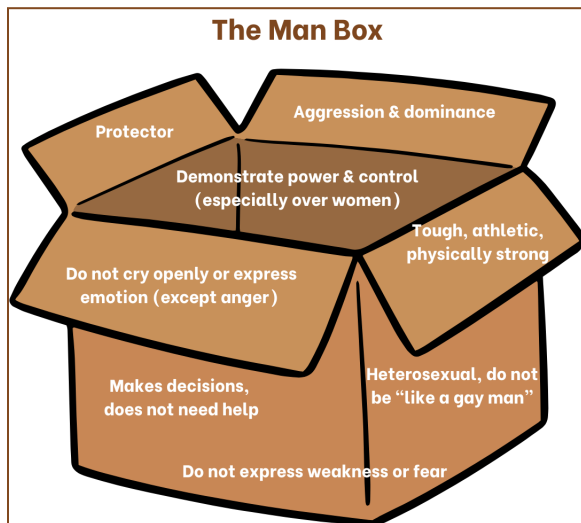
The Pathways to a Safer Sitka Coalition is a group of local agencies and individuals working together to create a healthier, more equitable community. We aim to reduce negative health outcomes, such as domestic violence, substance use, and suicide, by building equitable, accessible, and culturally-responsive 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 male engagement, which is reflective of Pathways' third goal: Boys and men are proactive within the community in building mutual respect and equality between men and women.

### Key Findings

Engaging men and boys in primary prevention is a necessary part of working towards an equitable community, which is why the Pathways Coalition identified this as a goal area. An important piece of this work is understanding how current rigid gender



norms that perpetuate a traditional, Western masculinity ideology have the potential to be detrimental, not only to the men who subscribe to them, but also the people who surround them, such as family and intimate partners. Masculinity ideology is “an individual’s internalization of cultural belief systems and attitudes toward masculinity and men’s roles. It outlines expectations for boys and men to conform to certain socially-sanctioned masculine behaviors and to avoid certain prescribed behaviors” (Levant & Richmond, 2007). In the United States, the dominant masculinity ideology perpetuated by society’s norms, also referred to as the “Man Box,” is rooted in power and



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control over everyone and everything. Socially-acceptable behaviors and ways of being include physical strength, not showing emotion, rejecting homosexuality, and exerting power over others, especially girls and women.

When considering the cultural environment in Alaska, there exists a unique kind of masculinity ideology that has all of the same underlying components of the traditional masculinity ideology that makes up the “Man Box,” but they just manifest in different ways as compared to other parts of the country or world. While both are rooted in power and control, the Lower 48’s masculinity ideology is rooted in urbanity, not rurality, like in Alaska. For instance, in the Continental US, society’s “ideal man” would be someone in a suit that is at the top of the corporate ladder. In Alaska, commonly referred to as “The Last Frontier,” the epitome of masculinity is rooted in domination over nature and people, where women, specifically Alaska Native women, were seen by white male colonizers as another resource and territory to be claimed and dominated. It portrays a white, heterosexual, rugged, physically strong man that hunts and fishes to survive in the deep, dangerous wilderness. It is the complete opposite of urban, feminine, and especially Alaska Native, as the relationship to the environment among Indigenous populations is one of symbiosis, not domination. (Hogan & Pursell, 2008)

This rugged, rural Alaskan version of masculinity has been characterized through literature and the tourist industry, as well as television and other media (Hogan & Pursell, 2008). For example, in the documentary series, *Deadliest Catch* (Beers, 2005), a group of “tough” men are featured going out on the unpredictable sea, not showing weakness or fear, and fishing in dangerous conditions. Another example is *Ice Road Truckers* (Beers, 2007-2017), which follows truck drivers who operate on ice roads, crossing frozen lakes and rivers, in Alaska and Canada. This is similar to *Deadliest Catch* in the way that it portrays another male-dominated, dangerous job where survival in and domination



**Deadliest Catch**

over nature are key to making a living in the rugged state. Media like these set expectations for Alaskans to conform to, as well as create perceptions by outsiders about what a “real Alaskan man” is supposed to be and do. It illustrates that Alaskans, specifically men, are supposed to be physically strong, fearless, and able to survive in harsh conditions. These expectations of what an Alaskan male should be are perpetuated by everyone,



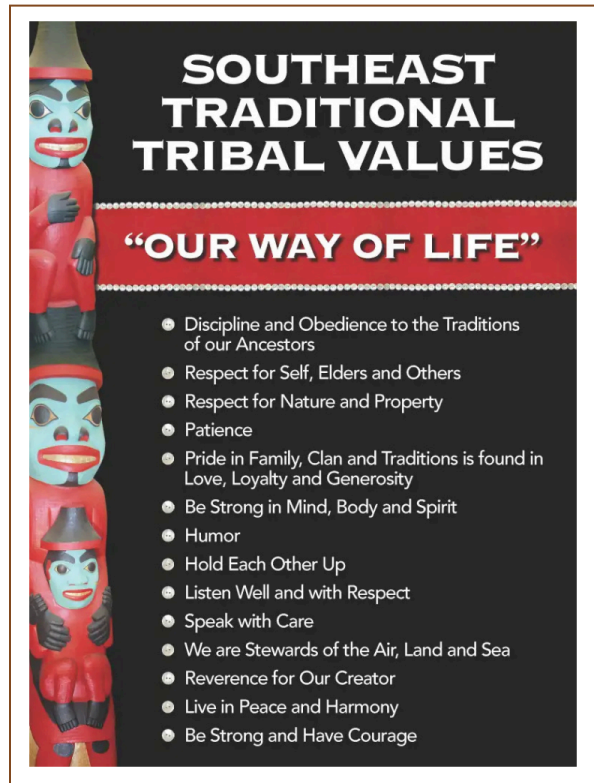
**Ice Road Truckers**

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regardless of gender, due to socialization and other influences (e.g., media), and therefore, create pressure to conform to this rigid brand of masculinity for both men and boys.

However, not all societies uphold norms perpetuating a version of masculinity that is rooted in power and control. Different cultural norms lend themselves to varied masculinity ideologies, many of which allow men to be and express the full spectrum of who they are as human beings. Cultural norms permitting men to expand the definition of masculinity beyond being “tough” and “in control” not only result in healthier individuals, but more equitable communities overall (Ragonese et al., 2019). This is seen in Indigenous communities around the world, and specifically in Alaska Native communities, where tribal values and cultural traditions guide and support individuals, including men, to play a significant role in caring for their communities. Respecting self, others, and elders, and learning to provide for community while also sharing leadership roles and decision-making across genders, are cultural norms commonly practiced in these communities (Fiveash et al., 2023). Unfortunately, the expansion of Western culture brought with it patriarchal norms and practices which severely damaged and disrupted systems of balance among Indigenous communities around the world. See the Key Findings section under Community Environments for more details regarding the impact of colonialism in Alaska. The predominance of rigid gender norms left by colonizers is not only pervasive across Alaska and the United States, but also contributes to harmful outcomes (e.g., violence, addiction, depression, suicide) for both men and boys, as well as entire communities (Ragonese et al., 2019).

Rigid gender norms upholding the traditional Western masculinity ideology have been shown to be a predictor of various kinds of violence, including intimate partner violence (IPV) (Moore & Stuart, 2005). One study in 2014 showed that when men are not able to adapt their masculinity to what is considered socially-acceptable, they experience something called discrepancy stress, which is the gap between one’s personal masculinity and that which is prescribed by society (Reidy et al., 2014). The men who experienced this stress were much more likely to have perpetrated intimate partner violence at some point in their lives, which is consistent with other studies that looked at masculine gender role conformity and its effects on IPV perpetration (Parrott



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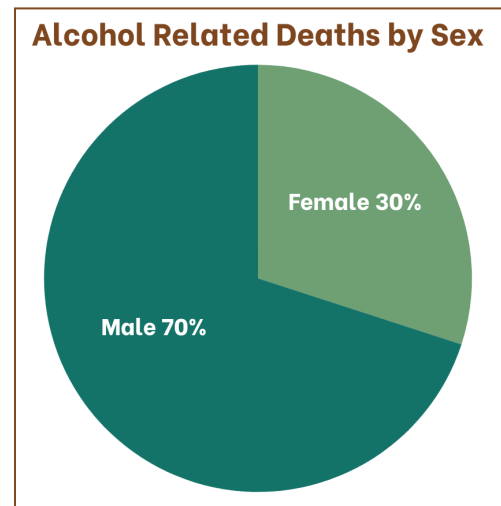
& Zeichner, 2003; Reidy et al., 2009; Moore & Stuart, 2005). It must also be noted that this rigid masculinity ideology is not just predictive of intimate partner violence, but also other kinds of interpersonal violence, including bullying, sexual violence, homicide, and other violent crime (Heilman et al., 2017; Crowther-Dowey & Silvestri, 2017).



When taking into account the traditional masculinity ideology in Alaska and the results from the studies above, it is not surprising that over 75% of women in the state have experienced sexual violence, and about 70% have experienced intimate partner violence in their lifetimes (University of Alaska Anchorage, 2020). Additionally, in 2020, Alaska ranked first among all fifty states in the number of females murdered by males in single victim and single offender homicides, with 55% of those murdered being Alaska Native women, despite only making up about 15% of the state's population (Violence Policy Center, 2022). The state of Alaska is also

ranked the second highest in violent crime, which includes the offenses of murder and nonnegligent manslaughter, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault. This rate is about double the national average (Alaska Department of Public Safety, 2023). Of course, this does not mean that traditional masculinity ideology is the only cause for the violence that occurs, but these rigid gender norms, as mentioned previously, have been shown to increase the likelihood of violence.

Another risky behavior that stems from the “Man Box” is excessive alcohol use. Excessive alcohol use refers to drinking in ways that can negatively impact one's health (CDC, 2024). Masculinity norms stipulate that in order “to be a man,” you need to partake in risky behaviors such as binge drinking;<sup>1</sup> it is not socially acceptable to just have one drink (Heilman et al., 2017). In the United States, men and boys make up, on average, almost 70% of alcohol-related deaths each year (CDC, 2024). About ⅔ of those deaths are from chronic conditions that developed due to drinking alcohol over time (e.g., cancer, heart disease, alcohol use disorder), whereas ⅓ of the deaths are



<sup>1</sup>According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, binge drinking is defined as “a pattern of drinking that brings blood alcohol concentration levels to 0.08 g/dL.” This typically occurs after four drinks for women and five drinks for men in about two hours (NIAAA, 2024).



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from drinking too much on one occasion (e.g., motor vehicle accidents, alcohol-related drug overdoses, alcohol poisoning, deaths by suicide) (CDC, 2024). The state of Alaska itself is among the top 15 states with the highest prevalence of binge drinking among adults (America's Health Rankings, 2023) and has the highest rate of deaths due to alcohol poisoning (NCDAS, 2024). In 2010 alone, excessive alcohol consumption was estimated to cost the state of Alaska \$827,200,000, half of which was paid by various levels of government, with 77.1% of the total cost being attributed to binge drinking (Spears, 2018). Alcohol misuse unfortunately creates a two-fold problem because not only does it cause harm on its own, it also increases risk of/exacerbates poor health outcomes such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, HIV, liver cirrhosis, unintentional injuries, self-harm, violence, and mental disorders (Ragonese et al., 2019; WHO, 2014).

Not only does the pressure to conform to limiting definitions of what it means to be a man result in increases of lashing out toward others, it also has a damaging effect internally, and can adversely impact one's mental health and sense of self. Men who subscribe to the "Man Box" are more likely to suffer from depression, suicidal ideation, and suicide (Heilman et al., 2017). Much of this is due to trying to be someone that does not align with one's self or is not attainable; and/or because these norms tell boys and men to suppress their emotions, resulting in a disconnect in understanding and addressing them. For instance, there is a correlation between economic recessions and increased suicides in men (Heilman et al., 2019). This could be because men overwhelmingly perceive themselves as the breadwinners in a household (Heilman et al., 2017), and if they fail, they are failing as men in the eyes of society. Without the skills to navigate these conflicting and hard emotions in a healthy way, depression and suicide are more likely to occur. For instance, men and boys who subscribe to these norms are actually twice as likely to have had suicidal thoughts in the last two weeks than those who do not (Heilman et al., 2017).

It is also important to note that men and boys who do not subscribe to the "Man Box" also face challenges with mental health decline. Rejecting the pressures of societal expectations, whether subconsciously or consciously, very often results in pushback from others, increasing the risk of being bullied and isolated, and thereby making it unsafe for men to embrace and express their true selves. This inability to be true to oneself in any setting can increase feelings of self-loathing, depression, and even suicide. Whether inside the "Man Box" or not, men are committing suicide at higher rates than women in the state of Alaska, where men are almost three times more likely to commit suicide than women (America's Health Rankings, 2021). Additionally, men and boys are also told that seeking help is a sign of weakness, or not "manly," and, therefore, often do not receive the support they need and instead struggle to deal with these external pressures on their own. Bottling up repressed emotions can and does lead to men taking matters into their own hands, often resulting in self-destructive behavior patterns as well as lashing out at others, as illustrated throughout this Key Findings section.

In 2019, Equimundo and Axe released research that attempted to calculate the



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Cost category	Estimated economic toll annually in the US
Bullying and violence	\$772,100,000
Sexual violence	\$631,400,000
Depression	\$2,410,300,000
Suicide	\$4,422,500,000
Binge drinking	\$181,090,000
Traffic accidents	\$7,300,400,000
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$15,717,790,000</b>

annual economic impacts of the “Man Box” in the United States by categorizing six risks attributable to the harmful masculine norms and calculating a cost for each one: (1) bullying and violence, (2) sexual violence, (3) depression, (4) suicide, (5) binge drinking, and (6) traffic accidents (Heilman et al., 2019). In total, even though these are thought to be underestimates of the true number because it is hard to quantify the tangible costs of this traditional masculinity ideology, the “Man Box” costs the United States about \$15.7 billion, which is just over \$43 million each day (Heilman et al., 2019). In Sitka, there have been efforts to counteract the impact of unhealthy

masculinity norms by engaging men as allies and mentors in the prevention work under the Pathways Coalition. However, not only has it been challenging to engage men, the efforts to do so have been carried out mostly by the backbone agency, Sitkans Against Family Violence (SAFV), and not necessarily the collective, despite this being one of the Pathways goals. To better understand why engaging men has been difficult, SAFV conducted a [community readiness assessment \(CRA\)](#) in 2016. Through the CRA, SAFV intended to gain insight on the male perception of domestic violence and sexual assault in Sitka, why men were not participating in male engagement efforts, and how to effectively partner with men in the community. The low stage of readiness (level 2) revealed by the results of this CRA were both eye-opening and validating, suggesting that the existing strategies implemented to engage men were not meeting them at their level of readiness which was denial/resistance.

Fortunately, the CRA provided suggestions for how to raise the stage of readiness and move from apathy to empowerment and included activities like

sharing stories of people affected by the issue, soliciting support from people in SAFV’s social network, communicating strategically with opinion leaders and influencers, and sharing accurate information and articles through various channels. In the last 8 years, SAFV has moved forward with many of these suggestions; featuring men in a panel to

Dimension	Score	Stage
A: Existing Community Efforts	2.71	Denial/Resistance
B: Community Knowledge of Efforts	2.43	Denial/Resistance
C: Community Climate	1.29	No Awareness
D: Community Knowledge of Issue	2.43	Denial/Resistance
E: Resources for Prevention	2.71	Denial/Resistance
F: Leadership	2.57	Denial/Resistance



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talk about masculinity norms during a community conversation, providing opportunities for interested men to participate in trainings and/or gatherings around the state to further discuss the issue of masculinity norms and their impact on society and acquire tools for intervening, and highlighting adult men and teen boys in messaging campaigns to help change the narrative around masculinity to be more inclusive and representative (SAFV, 2017).

In 2018, a group of men representing a diverse cross-section of Sitka and who had been involved with SAFV's male engagement efforts in some way were invited to participate in a focus group discussion where they were asked what led them to be involved in past efforts, how SAFV could meaningfully engage them and other men going forward, and what meaningful engagement looked like to them and their peers. Men who participated in this discussion shared that many of them became more acutely aware of harmful gender norms due to having women in their lives who shared their stories and experiences. Exposure to these stories led them to reflect more in-depthly on their own lives, how masculinity norms shaped and influenced them as young boys, and when they themselves unknowingly perpetuated sexist norms. Getting involved with SAFV's male engagement efforts further increased awareness of their own subconscious sexism and fueled the desire to change, as well as provided tools to hold others accountable. They shared that having more access to tools and trainings would help them continue to increase their self-awareness as well as learn how to confront unhealthy masculine behaviors by effectively calling men in. Training and tools would also help them be more proactive and confident in becoming allies and participating in efforts to engage men. Additionally, they unanimously agreed that it is ultimately men's responsibility to hold other men accountable and show up for women, as well as mentor young boys to embrace a more authentic and healthier version of masculinity. The focus group participants said having spaces where men are able to connect and share with one another, allow each other to be vulnerable, and safely express their emotions without the risk of backlash would help them develop the skills and confidence to show up more authentically as allies and role model a better way to be a man for younger generations. (SAFV, 2018)



Additionally, men said that they didn't know that they were needed, or what their role could potentially be in preventing violence. Perhaps changing the message or marketing to men about their potential role, how to get involved, and why they are needed is a strategy for reaching more men (SAFV, 2018). Some of this is already happening

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through the Boys Run I toowú klatseen (BRITK) male mentors media campaign which has not launched yet. This campaign features former male coaches in a film and poster series about how harmful masculinity norms impacted them as young boys, and how a program like BRITK can help change the messages the next generation of boys are receiving. It also serves as a recruiting tool for getting more men involved as coaches for the program. The Sitka Youth Leadership Committee's (SYLC) Mold Your Masculinity campaign is another messaging strategy to help shift the narrative around masculinity norms, where teens of all genders are spotlighted talking about the impacts of these rigid gender norms on individuals and society, with a call to action for men to embrace a healthier, more authentic version of masculinity.

Changing the narrative around masculinity is important, and media can be an effective tool as demonstrated through the various campaigns and messages developed by the SYLC teens and BRITK coaches in recent years. However, portraying men in media as kind, vulnerable, patient, and embracing other qualities counteractive to the dominant masculinity ideology can result in backlash and be perceived as a “war against masculinity” or a “war against men.” In 2019, when Gillette created an advertisement playing off its tagline, from “The Best a Man Can Get” to “The Best a Man Can Be,” featuring men intervening in sexist behavior (e.g., catcalling, fighting), public outcry was overwhelming with double the amount of dislikes as likes, and both men and women claiming the brand was “emasculating” men (Baggs, 2019). Gillette acknowledged this criticism and instead of shying away from the message, doubled down on their message, even pledging to donate one million dollars annually for three years to various organizations and initiatives supporting positive masculinity (King, 2019).

Lastly, the focus group discussion revealed that there are some perceptions by men in the Sitka community about SAFV that make it difficult to engage men in general, let alone recruit positive male role models. Men felt as though SAFV was not an organization for them or where they are welcome (SAFV, 2018). In the last year, SAFV has become a gender-inclusive shelter, allowing all genders to seek residence if they are fleeing from domestic violence. Men have always been able to seek services from SAFV, but not permitted to stay in the building as it has historically been a refuge for women and children. Since the agency has shifted to becoming gender inclusive, and worked to increase community knowledge and understanding that men can be victims of domestic violence too, SAFV has seen an increase of men seeking services and residence as well as seeking employment at the agency.<sup>2</sup> SAFV's strategic communications efforts to rebrand the agency as gender inclusive, coupled with the efforts to message that it is okay for men to ask for and seek help, is helping to invite more male-identifying individuals into the space, whether it be as clients, employees, or community partners. Additionally, SAFV's rebranding efforts aim to expand the community's perception of the agency's services to include prevention. Helping Sitkans

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<sup>2</sup> There was a 500% increase in the number of male-identifying adults seeking services at SAFV between 2022 and 2024, after the agency became gender inclusive (SAFV, 2024).

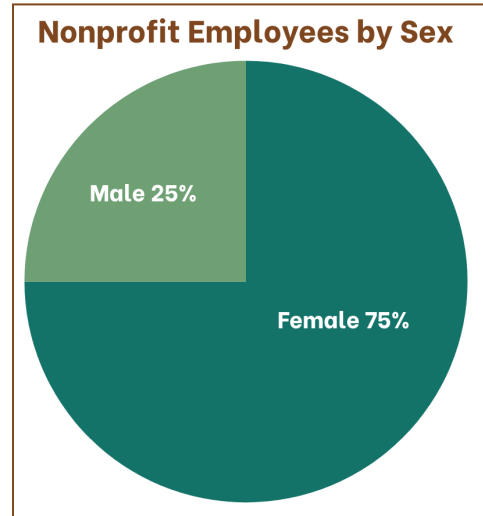


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understand the depth and breadth of the work coming out of SAFV and through the Pathways Coalition to engage youth, support families, shift school and community norms, and involve men could help community members, specifically men, identify how to plug in to the work as active participants.

As mentioned above, the work to engage men is currently being driven solely by SAFV, which could be contributing to the challenges of engaging men due to the barriers illustrated about men not feeling welcome or having a place at SAFV. Perhaps, bringing the male engagement work more fully under the umbrella of the entire coalition could help alleviate some of these barriers. Unfortunately, this is easier said than done, as most of the coalition partner agencies are staffed predominately by women<sup>3</sup> with few men available to participate in the coalition let alone male engagement work.

Additionally, there is a very clear and well-researched connection between men and their perpetration of violence against women, which makes it easy for people to see the relevance to engage men and boys in prevention through the purview of domestic violence agencies. The body of research on masculinity norms and their effects on society is rather new; not everyone working in other fields has had access to this research, or has had an opportunity to make the connections and see the relevance of masculinity norms to their specific field. Providing opportunities for coalition members to make these connections could be a good first step in building momentum around engaging men.



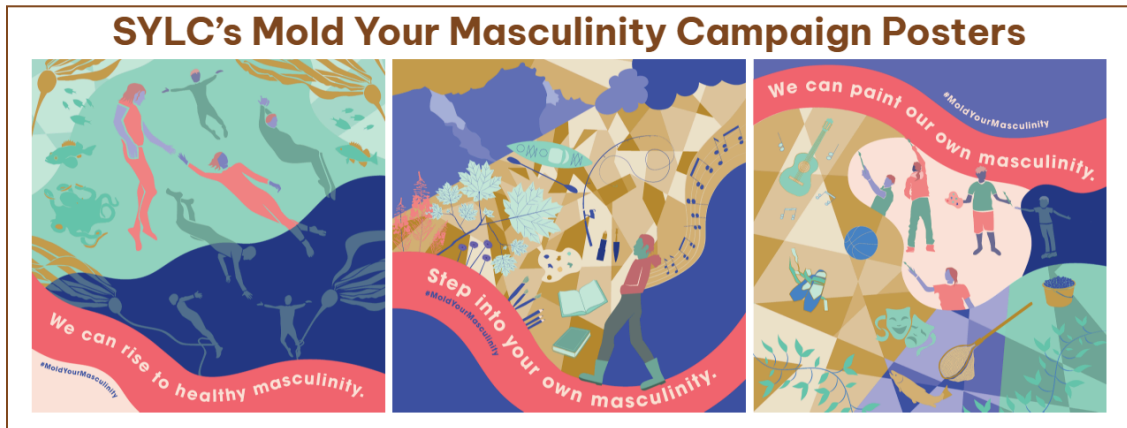
### Recommendations

Given the low readiness level of men in Sitka to engage in violence prevention efforts, it is important to continue messaging about harmful masculinity norms and their relevance. As described throughout, the dominant narrative around masculinity is harming everyone, and media messaging is one effective way of bringing awareness to the issue and shifting an individual's view. Increasing awareness is the first step in creating change in one's perceptions, beliefs, and ultimately behavior, and until that happens, the likelihood of these harmful masculinity norms being perpetuated remains high. Young boys will grow into men who conform to rigid masculinity norms, believing they are entitled to control and dominate others, resulting in the perpetuation of negative health outcomes seen in communities today. Working to break this cycle is paramount, and messaging is one important piece. Launching the BRITK media campaign mentioned above, could be a good step in engaging the community in conversations about the harmful effects of rigid masculinity norms, and counteracting

<sup>3</sup> Women make up about 70-75% of all nonprofit workers (Clerkin, 2024).

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the messages men and boys receive. Additionally, expanding the messages of the [Mold Your Masculinity campaign](#), created by teens in SYLC, could also help bolster opportunities for conversation and reflection.



Despite the low level of readiness, there are men in Sitka who are allies and have engaged in shifting norms, whether formally (e.g., as a BRITK coach) or informally (e.g., as an involved parent). Men who participated in SAFV's focus group (mentioned above), said that while they are more ready to get involved, they need more skill-building and training opportunities to feel prepared and confident in intervening when other men perpetuate behaviors or views stemming from these harmful norms. Working closely with men in the community who have demonstrated readiness to build their capacity, could help leverage other existing male-dominated social networks, where peer role-modeling of a more positive masculinity can occur, influencing more men to shift their views and ideally, their behaviors. Building up a cohort of men who subscribe to and embrace healthier versions of masculinity, will eventually, over time, create a snowball effect; influencing those around them to shift their views and behaviors of what it means to be a man. As momentum builds, and healthier versions of masculinity are role-modeled and accepted, more men and boys will feel confident in embracing their true selves and rejecting unrealistic and harmful societal expectations associated with masculinity.

As previously mentioned in the Key Findings section, there are other versions of masculinity that lend themselves to healthy outcomes. This is demonstrated by Indigenous communities around the world. Working in partnership with Indigenous communities to incorporate cultural values and teachings into efforts targeting boys and men is a potential strategy for expanding society's definition of masculinity from one that is rigid and harmful, to one that is more inclusive and representative. Increasing these efforts and working together across multiple agencies/issues could help curb the negative health outcomes that are currently connected with rigid gender norms.

While there have been some efforts to engage men and boys in prevention work in Sitka, they are mostly driven by one agency and not the collective. This could

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potentially be because other organizations do not yet see the relevance of these unhealthy masculinity norms to their work. Providing partner organizations with information around how these norms affect their work (e.g., trainings, dialogues, resources) could help create buy-in to collectively move forward around engaging men and boys as a coalition.

### Needs Statement

Goal 3. Male Engagement - *Continue messaging about society's unhealthy masculinity norms and their effects. Foster buy-in amongst coalition partner organizations to engage men and boys collectively. Work with existing male allies to engage more men and be mentors to the younger generations. Look to Indigenous cultures for ways of being that lend themselves to healthy individual and community outcomes.*



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