

HEALTHY AND HISTORIC SMILES

10 years of DHATs blazing trails, providing oral health care in rural Alaska

2014 marks the 10th anniversary of the first group of Alaska Native students returning from training in New Zealand to become Alaska's first Dental Health Aide Therapists (DHATs). These DHATs were pioneers in providing much-needed access to mid-level dental care and prevention services for Alaska Native people living in rural communities across the state.

Much has changed for Alaska's DHATs in 10 years. Today, nearly 30 DHATs provide professional and culturally competent dental care and prevention services, fighting the decades-long epidemic of oral suffering and disease around rural Alaska and improving access to dental care for Alaska Native people. Future DHATs no longer have to travel across the world for training. Since 2007, ANTHC's DHAT Educational Program has prepared DHAT students through a two-year program housed in state-of-the-art facilities and led by award-winning staff in Anchorage and Bethel.

The biggest change has been the perception of DHATs. Years ago, many in the dental profession fought against DHATs providing care. Today, Alaska's DHATs and ANTHC's Educational Program are recognized as the model of success for improving oral health and access to care for rural populations around the world.



The DHAT class of 2014 celebrate completing their first year of education in Anchorage and earning their white coats in June 2013.

What is a Dental Health Aide Therapist (DHAT)?

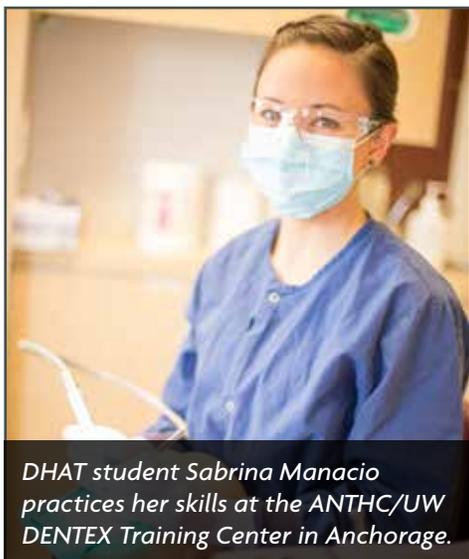
A DHAT is a dental team member who works under the supervision of a licensed dentist providing a limited range of services. Those services include patient- and community-based preventive dental care, basic restorations and uncomplicated extractions. DHAT education is two years in length, followed by at least three months of preceptorship with a supervising dentist. Successful completion of these requirements is needed prior to certification by the Alaska Community Health Aide Program Certification Board. A DHAT's education provides them with the skills to meet the majority of basic dental care needs in rural Alaska Native communities.

Why a DHAT's work is important ...

Roughly **83 million Americans** face barriers to dental care and **50 million children** and adults live in areas without enough dentists. Alaska Native people in rural communities without access to regular dental care have suffered an epidemic of poor oral health for many years. DHATs represent a community led solution to provide dental care and prevention services.

59% of American Indian and Alaska Native adults had periodontal (gum) disease.

Alaska Native children suffer from tooth decay at **twice the national average**.



DHAT student Sabrina Manacio practices her skills at the ANTHC/UW DENTEX Training Center in Anchorage.



Local DHATs work the crowd at the Kuskokwim 300 race in Bethel.

Alaska's DHATs – BY THE NUMBERS

27 DHATs are currently practicing in **81 communities** – most remote villages across Alaska.

More than **40,000 rural Alaskans** now have regular access to dental care from a DHAT; most have never had this kind of access or continuity of care before.

88 percent of Alaska's DHATs are Alaska Native and **78%** of DHATs are working in their home region. This improves relationships, makes for a cultural connection, and builds comfort and trust for patients.

An Alaska DHAT sees an average of **800** individual patients over **1,200** visits annually.

700 of those visits are preventive work, helping improve oral health moving forward.

11 Alaska Native DHATs were educated in New Zealand from 2003-2006. **6** of those New Zealand-educated DHATs are still certified today.

Typically, DHATs **bill \$150,000-\$250,000 per year** more than the cost to employ them and their assistant. The avoided patient travel cost is more than **\$40,000** per year per DHAT.

5 new DHATs are in the 2014 graduating class.

6 DHAT students are entering their second and final year of training.

More than **50** countries use DHATs to improve access to dental care, but only the Alaska Tribal Health System and **two** U.S. states (Minnesota and Maine) allow mid-level dental practitioners. More than **20** states are considering mid-level dental practitioners.

In 2008, a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Arctic Investigations study reported that:

100% of Alaska children between ages 4 and 5 living in communities without fluoride in the public water supply had at least one decayed or missing primary tooth.

67% of Alaska children between ages 4 and 5 living in communities with fluoridated water had at least one decayed or missing primary tooth.

How DHATs are improving the oral health of Alaska Native people ...

A recent pilot study by ANTHC and partners in The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Investigation team and the Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation found that ...

50-60% of 6-year-old children living in non-DHAT communities received dental care.

100% of 6-year-old children living in DHAT communities received dental care.