Aarigaa! An Alaskan Native Perspective on Creating Culture Change Through Connections, Experiences, Dining, and Communication
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“Aarigaa” is an Inupiat word that describes something that is “good!” or “fine!” or even, wonderful. Transitioning from a very rural village setting to an urban based Eden Alternative care environment can be successful when valued traditions, communication styles, and food preferences are honored. This presentation focuses on the Domain of Identity and supports mastery in Milestone 2.

Participants will be able to:
• Describe 3 elements of communication, including verbal and non-verbal methods of expression, specific to Alaska’s rich native culture;
• Identify 2 ways to prevent cultural isolation of Alaska Native Elders, as they receive health care and support services; and
• Name 2 ways that hearing Elder stories assist care partners in creating care plans that celebrate multi-cultural values.

About myself

Don Thibedeau was born and raised in Fairbanks with family from Rampart (Koyukon Athabascan) and attended schools in Fairbanks (and UAF). He taught K – 12 for six years before coming to Denali Center where he has been working in social services for 21 years, providing services for long term care residents in our nursing facility, including a dementia special care neighborhood. Don had been on the board of the Hospice of the Tanana Valley since 1991 and is one of the presenters for patient care volunteer training. He became the employee representative for the Greater Fairbanks Community Hospital Foundation in 2007. He is a 1998 – 1999 graduate of the New Ventures in Leadership program with the American Society on Aging and has done presentations both nationally and within our state (Sitka Care of the Elderly, Anchorage Pathways on Aging, Palliative Care Symposium, and numerous in Fairbanks). In 1998 Don was privileged to receive the Alaska Federation of Natives presidential award for Health in recognition to health related service to our elders. In 2007, the Alaska Alliance for Direct Service Careers named Don as Alaska’s Outstanding Direct Service Professional of the Year at the Full Lives Conference in Anchorage. In 2011, Doyon, Limited recognized Don with the Daaga’ Community Service Award.
Cultural Issues
Dedicated to the Tanana Chiefs and Elders of Alaska
** Worldwide Cultural Values

Cultural Values which may lead to misunderstanding
- Different realities, histories
- Requests
- Cooperation vs. Competition
- Group vs. individual
- Modesty vs. openness
- Non-interference vs. advice
- Silence vs. expression
- Sharing vs. saving
- Work ethic
- Time management
- Nature and Spirituality
- Extended vs. nuclear family
- Identity

Communication concepts
- Eye contact
- Handshakes
- Sharing information
- Behaviors
- Pause
- Listening
- Talk story
- Nonverbal
- Indirect
- Withdrawal
- Humor
**Culture And Familiarity Matter To Elders**

An Alaskan Eden home brings native traditions and cultural artifacts to its residents.

An article prepared for the Provider Magazine in September 2012 by Jordan Lewis, MSW, and Don Thibedeau

As the country faces a rapidly growing population of older adults, with a majority of them being ethnic minorities, the numbers requiring long term and post-acute care will also increase.

Recognizing this growing need among its own residents, the Denali Center in Fairbanks, Alaska, incorporates unique architectural style, plants, animals, and multigenerational interaction to bring a true sense of community to those who call it home.

Denali is an Eden Alternative home that operates from an elder-centered approach by identifying what is important to its residents, including those who are Alaska Natives.

**Honoring Culture**

Alaska Natives have a strong connection to their cultural practices and traditions, and just because they are in a facility does not mean they should leave this part of themselves behind.

Denali Center understands the importance of culture to its residents and has incorporated cultural activities into facility care as a way to honor Alaska Native residents and make them feel more at home. The foundation of these activities came from knowing that honoring the culture of the Alaska Native residents is important to their health and well-being and realizing the importance of establishing and building rapport before providing care.

The communication patterns of Alaska Natives are different; it takes time and patience to gain trust to provide quality care, and the cultural activities have assisted in this process for both residents and staff.

Some activities at DC that focus on Alaska Native culture includes the following: traditional native music and dances; videos, such as village documentaries, celebrations, the World Eskimo-Indian Olympics (WEIO), and the Athabascan fiddle festivals; native news from villages, regional corporations, and Denakkanaaga (an Alaska native elders organization); traditional native foods, such as moose, caribou, salmon, dried meats, and berries; and participation in cultural activities in the community, such as WEIO, the Festival of Native Arts, potlatches (a gift-giving festival and primary economic system practiced by Alaska Natives), and the North American sled dog races.
The purpose of these cultural activities is to support residents in their transition to placement, nourish their bodies and souls, and to celebrate cultural wealth.

Listening to the elders, it becomes apparent that many of them miss home, family, native foods, and their familiar environment. One can imagine the challenges associated with moving from a home where they have lived all their lives to an unfamiliar facility. The inclusion of these activities is one way to ease the transition and help the residents feel connected culturally, as well as provide them native foods and activities that previously brought them joy and pleasure.

The center incorporated these cultural activities with the aim of improving the health and well-being of the residents, but also to celebrate the cultural diversity that exists among the residents across the state of Alaska.

Residents Respond Positively
As testimony to the importance and benefit of these activities for the center, residents have expressed their appreciation with the following quotes: “I really enjoy the food they serve. It is just like I had growing up.” “I like dried meat mixed with fat and moose or caribou on the bone so I can have the marrow.” “I feel like I was at a real native meeting. It always feels like we are family.”

One resident summarized the feelings of the native residents: “I really like the activities; it reminds me of back home.”

The center began incorporating these activities because it recognized that the loss of culture and community ties increases isolation, boredom, and grief.

Based on testimony from the Alaska Native residents, the response to these well-attended activities has been positive. Providing these cultural activities has increased satisfaction with placement; increased involvement in the activities, including participation in local events and sharing stories and recipes; and strengthened relationships between residents, family, and staff.

The family members of these residents are also happy with their loved ones’ involvement in the activities; they no longer view their family members as sick and dependent, but as active and healthy.

In addition to improving their health, the support for these activities is positive because they are low cost and provided by the residents, family members, and community, which highlights the generosity of the community.
Denali is supported in the provision of these services as a majority of them are donated, in both money and time, and the activities department and residents council also fund some activities. Throughout the year, family and community donate food, such as moose, caribou, duck, salmon, whitefish, muskrat, beaver, and berries.

The residents receive newsletters from regional native corporations, and the native videos are either purchased or donated to keep the residents abreast of tribal news, politics, and celebrations in their respective regions.

Visits Home Boost Satisfaction
As a skilled nursing facility, Denali is home to elders who cannot live at home by themselves and require some type of nursing care. The Leave of Absence program enables residents to return to their home communities for memorial potlatches, holiday events, family celebrations, tribal meetings, subsistence activities, or an extended weekend visit.

A volunteer or trained staff member who is able to attend to physical needs accompanies elders on their trips home. Being able to return to the village and participate in cultural events removes the stigma of being a “sick person” or patient, which is the dominant thought associated with nursing homes or long term care facilities in urban Alaska. Airfare or gas money for some of these trips is usually provided by the elders themselves, and additional support has come from families, guardians, or a regional native corporation.

The story of “Jake” illustrates the importance of these trips and the reasoning behind Denali’s support of these events.

Jake was given the opportunity to go home to visit his family in a rural village in Interior Alaska. During the visit, his family was reminded of his physical limitations that his family could not provide for in the village, but they also saw that he appeared to be healthy and doing well. Jake enjoyed his visit home, as did his family, but they realized he needed more care than they could provide and understood he had to return to the center.

According to the social worker who coordinated the visit, Denali staff saw the joy this visit brought to Jake and realized the value in this particular activity, which continues to this day.

Today, the traditional foods have now become full meals on a weekly basis for the residents and are fully embraced and accepted by Denali staff. These activities started with a vision and have become a fully supported and respected program that has benefited numerous residents, families, and staff.
Denali is one example of an Eden home that sees firsthand the benefits and importance of integrating cultural activities and traditional foods.

It is the hope of the center that it can serve as an example of how long term care and skilled nursing facilities can incorporate cultural activities for the residents that will improve their quality of life and honor their cultural identity, language, values, and customs.

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Cultural Awareness: Understanding Others, Alaska Native Perspectives

Whether working at the hospital or Denali Center or visiting anywhere in the area, it will be readily apparent that Fairbanks is rich in cultural and ethnic diversity. Established as a town over one hundred years ago, its hills and rivers were previously traversed by the land’s first peoples. Understanding a little about the various cultures can increase respect among people, help to appreciate similarities and differences, and foster acceptance and good working relationships.

A student at a university level sign language class, Betty enjoyed learning how she could better communicate with hearing-impaired native people. One evening, inclement weather caused her to be late for class. When the instructor asked where Betty might be, a student made the sign to indicate she must be drinking. Those who knew Betty knew that her beverage of choice was tea. Accepting people as individuals and avoiding stereotypes are goals in respecting diversity.

Learning about traditional values of a culture can help care providers see how people within that culture cope with issues and how they may respond to illness or death. While all cultures value respect, Alaska Native cultures tend to carry respect for land, resources, and people into their interpersonal relationships and communication styles.

Often the family unit may include much more than the immediate family of western culture. Because adoptions were not unusual and cousins may be viewed in the same terms as siblings, it is important to determine whom the patient views as family. Sometimes major decisions are delegated to grandchildren or a family spokesperson.

There are twenty different Alaska Native languages and many elders are most comfortable communicating in their primary dialect. While most patients seen at the hospital have attended school and speak English well, there are sometimes problems in communication due to style and nonverbal cues. Being aware that rate of speech, the use of pauses to allow thought or reflection about further communication, and in some cases the avoidance of direct eye
contact may help alleviate some misunderstandings. Direct eye contact may be appropriate for greetings and while watching for verbal or nonverbal responses. Some regions rely greatly on facial expressions to indicate yes, no, pain, questioning, and emotion. Always looking at someone may seem disrespectful or communicate threat.

In addition, Fort Yukon elder, Hannah Solomon, suggested that one may need to use hand motions sometimes. "It is easy to talk to our own people in our own language. So hard if you don't. Try hardest to find person from the same language and from the same village. High language is very hard. Talk in simple, plain language.” Using medical terminologies, abbreviations, or unnecessarily descriptive words may hinder getting a message across.

When asked about how to best communicate with a relative, Minto elder Jonathan David suggested to “tell them two times. Use the same words. The first time they will hear what you say, the second time they will understand.”

Because some topics are not spoken about traditionally (e.g.: referring to the time we are going to die), it may be necessary to take on the role of a third person (not asking questions or making requests for yourself, but because of what the doctor wants). Because many elders deny pain to avoid drawing attention to them, it may be helpful to ask direct questions that imply the pain already exists (“How much is your shoulder hurting you?” instead of “Does your shoulder hurt?”)

Being present with people who are sick or dying is very important culturally. Informing families of declining status and accommodating large numbers of visitors and traditions (e.g., serving of food, listening to music, telling stories) helps to ease the difficult time. Because informing people that their loved one has died is viewed as very shocking, staff may want to determine if family prefers to have someone else notified first (such as a pastor or spiritual leader) who may then inform the family and provide support.

Considering all the intricacies of various cultures, it is important to not be overwhelmed by concern of offense. All cultures value respect, love, and compassion and people appreciate even the smallest efforts to be sensitive while providing quality care.

Questions:

Which is an example of an Alaska Native communication style?
   a. Facial expression
   b. Pause
   c. Telling stories
   d. All of the above

How many Alaska Native languages are there?
   a. Five
   b. Ten
   c. Fifteen
   d. Twenty
Respecting cultural diversity in the workplace can help to
   a. Avoid negative stereotypes
   b. Improve patient satisfaction
   c. Foster good working relationships
   d. All of the above

When an Athabascan speaker pauses, it may mean that
   a. She wants to catch her breath
   b. She is done talking and it is your turn
   c. She is preparing to share more information with you
   d. None of the above

Oral histories and elder’s stories are
   a. Useful in understanding culture and current communication styles
   b. Full of superstition and ignored by all now
   c. Only interesting for anthropologists
   d. Not valid in today’s modern society

An example of traditional values that impact communication include
   a. Words, like all parts of an animal, are not to be wasted
   b. Respect is shown by indirect requests and less direct eye contact
   c. Bragging, or talking about the future is avoided
   d. All of the above