Taming Coronavirus: Siberian Yup'ik COVID-19 strategies on St.Lawrence Island, Savoonga USA

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As the COVID-19 spotlight has been primarily focused on developed nations and their domestic agendas, the challenges for remote regions are often overlooked. Among the most compelling stories in the health care crisis centers around the small Siberian Yup'ik island community of Savoonga. With a population of 826, Savoonga is in the Bering Sea, off Alaska's western coast, closer to Russia. It is one of only two villages on St. Lawrence Island, along with Gambell. (Bartholomew, 2015).

Like other Alaskan Native communities in the High North, for Savoonga, the deadly coronavirus epidemic has exacerbated the tangible consequences of climate change. Changes in sea ice melt has created seasonal imbalances in the Bering Sea's marine ecosystem, creating food insecurity. The loss of sea-ice hinders Savoongan whalers, seal and walrus hunters and fishers' ability to access their traditional sustenance. Warming is altering the finely tuned and interconnected marine ecosystem. "The seals and walrus are getting skinnier," according to George Noongwook, the recently departed whaler and author. The fish these mammals feed upon are moving north, seeking colder waters.

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As the coronavirus silently made its way to Savoonga's shores, the hard, skillful work of a subsistence way-of-life, already impeded by climate change, got that much harder.

The resolve of Savoongans, like all Alaskans, to survive COVID-19 is fueled by painful memories of past plagues, epidemics, pandemics, and an 1887 starvation at the onset of commercial whaling that left St. Lawrence graveyards full, often with Elders who are the mainstay to keep the Siberian Yu'pik culture, ethic and language from "disappearing." (Martin, 2009).

The 1918 Spanish flu pandemic that, according to author Alfred W. Crosby, killed some 30 million worldwide, wiped out more than half of Alaskan Native villages, with dying adults and children alike having scant resistance to the infections brought by outsiders. Of the villages that survived, more than half the population was gone. (Crosby, 2003).

Seven years later, in 1925, a diphtheria outbreak, again, brought by outsider commercial fishers, fur traders or miners, enveloped both Nome and its nearby Native villages. The Nome-based doctor, Curtis Welch, predicted an unstoppable mortality rate without the anti-toxin serum. Getting the diphtheria anti-toxin to Nome posed a formidable problem to a town accessible only by boat, plane, or dogsled. That winter, one of the worst in decades, Nome was blocked by sea ice that froze the harbor. It was also unreachable by bush plane whose water-cooled engines froze. (Crosby, 2003).

With cases mounting, public health officials in Anchorage assembled a non-stop relay of 20 dog teams to deliver the lifesaving anti-toxin "serum run." The primarily Indigenous mushers and about 150 sled dogs trekked, non-stop, the 674 miles from Nenana to Nome, in just five and a half days. Leonhard Seppala, an award-winning dogsledder, and his Siberian Husky lead dog, Togo, traversed 264 miles in the sub-zero temperatures, handing off the serum to his colleague, Gunnar Kassen, who borrowed Seppala's dog, Balto. Balto famously ran the last leg, bringing the serum into Nome. Today's internationally known Iditarod dogsled race offers an annual tribute to the lifesaving relay. (Martin, 2009 and Crosby, 2003).

Once again faced with a global pandemic reaching their shores, the Elders set the tone for Savoonga's careful and effective COVID-19 strategy, with particular focus on protecting the children. The Elders and leadership knew they had to act fast and unified. A single case could decimate the entire village, with multi-generational families living close-together in small homes. Savoonga Tribal Chairman, Ben Pungowiyi, a world class ivory carver, teacher, and hunter, said "we are a people with a long future and deep past." Pungowiyi put the 2,000-year-old community of subsistence hunters and whalers on full lock down. All public movements were restricted. No-one was allowed to leave their home, except to get their mail. Everyone played a role in the communities' unified effort to stay safe. The Savoonga Native Store announced it would accept orders only by telephone on its landline, and then made door-to-door deliveries. The tribe offered transport to anyone who needed stove oil or gas.

Preston Rookok, a lifelong Savoongan whaler, noted that tribal leadership, as part of its protective effort to shut the island down, restricted the number of whalers allowed on the small whale-hunting boats to family members only. The tribe also required everyone on the boat stand six feet apart. "We call it prevention," Rookok said. The schools were shut down. The daily plane coming in and out of Nome, across the Bering, required full testing before anyone was allowed aboard. Ceremonial dances for funerals, celebrations or spiritual purpose were halted.

While a considerable amount of reporting focused on the high mortality rates in the lower 48 states, academics like Andrey Petrov noted that the high level of vigilance and preparedness of Alaskan Native communities allowed for an effective COVID-19 response (Petrov, 2017).

The second prong of Savoonga's strategy to curb the pandemic was that the federally recognized sovereign tribes opted to coordinate with the state's centralized public health infrastructure to form Alaskan Native community partnerships. This cooperative approach made direct and coordinated links between the state's vaccine distribution with community-based protection strategies. Additionally, Alaskan Native Tribes generally opted for total lock-downs, mask wearing and social distancing, despite the reluctance of the State to mandate protective action.

However, all of Alaska's Tribal governments opted to partner with the Alaskan State agencies rather than the more top-down federal agencies, such as the DC-region based Indian Health Service. Alaska's vaccination program was perhaps more successful than many of those in the lower 48 states due to the integrated working relationship developed between the Alaskan Natives and the State. Dr. Anne Zink, Alaska's Chief Medical Officer, told the American College of Emergency Physicians that Alaska's strategy to deliver the vaccines worked as effectively as it did because of a partnership with Alaska's 229 sovereign tribes. (ACEP News Central, 2021).

Alaska's leadership took aggressive action with the federal government that granted Alaska territory status, rather than a state. This, along with the Indian Health Service and the Department of Defense's higher allocation of doses, allowed for vaccines to be delivered in monthly tranches rather than more limited weekly deliveries. Dr. Zink said the territorial designation allowed Alaska more time for planning and logistics, which was important given the need to get the vaccines to remote villages by air, boat, snowmobiles or dogsled, in harsh storms or temperatures well below zero. In Savoonga, where the vaccines are delivered by air from Nome, the number of vaccines were boosted by support from the Indian Health Service and U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, given the high number of veterans who live in, or retire to, Alaska, as well as the high number of Alaskan Native military veterans and Native peoples generally. (ACEP News Central, 2021).

During one of the regular Tribal-Health COVID-19 Zoom calls between Dr. Zink and the tribal leadership, one of the participants noted his resolve to protect his community in direct tribute to the grandparents he never knew; they all died of diphtheria, according to a participant.

The rapid and aggressive actions of the tribal-state partnership made a difference.

As of February 8, 2022, the Nome Nugget reported that:

- the U.S. had 76,852,768 COVID-19 cases and 905,543 COVID-related deaths. Alaska had 220,388 cases, 3,478 hospitalizations and 1,060 deaths.
- the current 127 patients diagnosed with COVID-19 hospitalized, with four additional patients who are under investigation for a total of 131 current COVID-related hospitalizations in Alaska.
- the Nome Bering Strait and Norton Sound region, (that includes Savoonga,) saw at least 4,332 cases, 37 hospitalizations and 3 deaths. (Schreiber, 2023).

While Savoonga has experienced several spikes in numbers that then retreat, the Savoonga Emergency Room Tech at the Norton Sound Health Corporation, Rene Trevino, said the number of patients at the clinic doubled during COVID. But, he added, thanks to the preparedness of the

tribal actions, "no one needed to be medevaced out." And, he said with relief, "no one in Savoonga has died from COVID-19."

By April 2023, Chairman Ben Pungowiyi spoke as though COVID-19 had become just another hard issue that the tribe must address, much like many other of the mounting challenges for the centuries old community that has prevailed with its 2,000 years of living in balance with the Bering Sea's marine ecosystem.

As though anticipating the time when the U.S. Government would shift COVID-19 from "pandemic" to "endemic" status, the Savoonga Tribal Chair said his people are moving on. "We have red tide that is poisoning the mussels on shore with threats to people and mammals that consume them; we are inundated with impacts of climate change that melts the sea-ice; The different seasons are changing the biodiversity and timing of the marine ecosystem; our waters are being polluted by increasing numbers of passing ships in the Bering Sea, with plastics now showing up on our shores," he explained.

Savoongans are on the front lines of climate change, and they succeeded in both accessing the vaccine and developing a community-based strategy in which no lives have been, thus far, lost during the COVID pandemic. They handled the pandemic better than most with tribal and state government cooperation at its center. The Chairman noted that Savoongans are increasingly being invited to state, national, Indigenous, and international meetings to discuss strategies to build greater balance in policies that reject concepts of human domination of the natural world, and instead, hear the voices of the plants, mammals and oceans.

Savoongans, like Indigenous subsistence communities worldwide, embody a philosophy and practice strengthened by thousands of years in the High North. For a truly safe, sustainable and equitable future, Savoongans – and all Indigenous subsistence peoples - must have a seat at the table of international discourse and policymaking to improve the possibility for a safe and sustainable future.

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