Sled dog husbandry as approach to supporting transfer of traditional knowledge and resilience to at risk youth in rural Alaska

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ABSTRACT:

Sled dogs have long been integral to the identities of the indigenous societies of the arctic, where for millennia they have been used for transportation, hunting, recreation, and protection. The sudden plunge of these societies into the modern world, with its notions of individualism versus collectivism and materialism versus spiritualism, has resulted in a difficult cultural transition, creating dramatic social and economic upheaval. In the final years of his life, Athabaskan elder and world champion sled dog racer, George Attla, conceived of a program that engaged youth in learning sled dog husbandry as a means of transferring traditional cultural knowledge from elders, provided a sense of self-identity, and improved the mental, behavioral, and physical resiliency of young people and their communities. Using elders to teach mushing related traditional skills such as hunting and fishing, and food preparation, as well as fire-building and arctic survival, students in the FAYSDP program spend time in working kennels, where they gained a sense of cultural history and self-esteem. Improvements in student behavior, and student outcomes have been observed, resulting in a positive transformation for the entire community. The work that Attla started in his home village of Huslia has grown, and is now being used as the model for an expanded A-CHILL project that serves nine other schools in Alaska’s Interior, with high school students learning traditional skills while taking University courses and preparing for village based careers in the fast growing healthcare fields.