

COMMUNITY-DRIVEN HEALTH CARE:

# *The Power of* **RELATIONSHIPS**

BY SOUTHCENTRAL FOUNDATION


**A**laska Native and American Indian people across the country are aware of what can be accomplished through collaboration and community engagement, and there is no field where these values are more important than health care. Southcentral Foundation's (SCF's) Nuka System of Care is an Alaska Native-owned and operated health care system providing health care and related services to approximately 65,000 Alaska Native and American Indian people in southcentral Alaska. SCF

was incorporated in 1982 under the tribal authority of Cook Inlet Region, Inc (CIRI). CIRI is one of thirteen Alaska Native Regional Corporations established in 1971 when Congress passed the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act.

SCF is designed and built by and for customer-owners (SCF's term for patients). Customer-owners form strong relationships with their care providers who they partner with on their journey to wellness. With customer-owners at the forefront of decision-making within the organization, all programs and

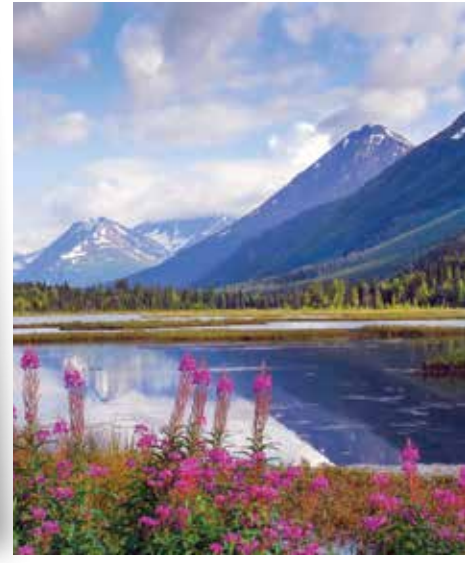
service offerings are based on customer-owner needs. Customer-owner feedback drives all changes and improvements. SCF works to ensure the values of the community are respected throughout the health care system, and one way it does this is through its Operational Principles.

SCF's Operational Principles were created using feedback and direction from customer-owners. The thirteen principles define characteristics of the relationship-based Nuka System of Care, providing a framework for process and system redesign.



"Learning circles are not new and have been used by indigenous peoples for centuries."

# Interpersonal Relationships



SCF's Operational Principles spell RELATIONSHIPS, and are as follows:

- Relationships between the customer-owner, family, and provider must be fostered and supported. SCF works at an organizational level to support the building and maintenance of relationships, not only between providers and customer-owners, but throughout the entire organization. SCF offers training to all employees to teach the communication and relationship-building skills needed to effectively support customer-owners in achieving wellness. One example of this is SCF's Core Concepts training, which is based on the Alaska Native value of sharing and listening to story. This three-day training has been implemented successfully by several organizations, with support from SCF to reflect the values of the communities served.

- Emphasis on wellness of the whole person, family, and community including physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual wellness. SCF works to maintain a continuum of services that address facets of wellness in partnership with customer-owners. For example, SCF has integrated behavioral health consultants into primary care, making behavioral services accessible for customer-owners on the same day requested. SCF has also implemented approaches to trauma-informed care within its primary care clinics, residential and

outpatient behavioral health, and the Family Wellness Warriors program. One program provided through Family Wellness Warriors is Arrigah House, which explores the impact of our stories, including adverse childhood experiences and generational and historical cycles of harm. Participants explore healthier ways of relating in a safe, peer-led space.

- Locations that are convenient for customer-owners and create minimal stops to get all their needs addressed. This principle governs many different aspects of SCF, from facility design to the provision of services in remote and rural areas. SCF's facilities are designed with the idea that customer-owners should be able to easily access all the services they need without having to visit multiple locations. For customer-owners in rural areas, SCF providers visit regularly, use telemedicine, and maintain community health centers, so customer-owners can access services without having to travel extensively.

- Access is optimized and waiting times are limited. SCF structures its services to minimize wait times for customer-owners. For example, primary care providers do not schedule each day fully, instead leaving some appointment slots open so customer-owners can have same-day access to services if they choose. SCF's integrated behavioral health consultants

do the same thing, with a majority of their appointment slots being open for immediate access.

- Together with the customer-owner as an active partner. SCF recognizes that, outside of acute or emergency care, individuals control their own health. SCF works to engage customer-owners as much as possible, partnering on the journey to wellness and supporting healthier choices. By understanding their values and health goals, SCF can provide high-quality health care effectively.

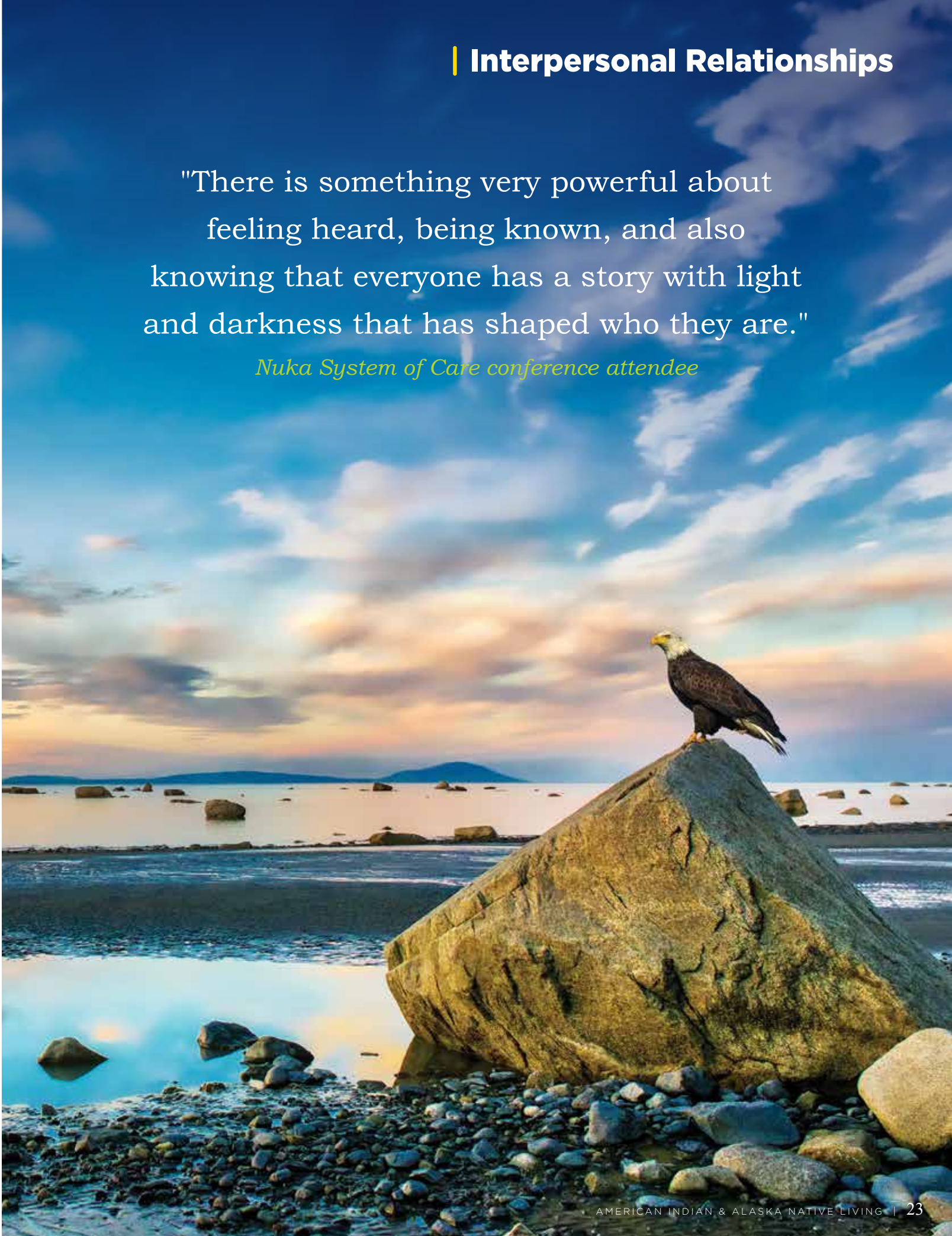
- Intentional whole-system design to maximize coordination and minimize duplication. Everything in SCF's system is designed to facilitate coordination and collaboration, both with customer-owners and within the system itself. For example, SCF's integrated care teams sit together in open workspaces so team members can easily communicate with each other. Pharmacists and behavioral health consultants are co-located so they can collaborate with care teams as needed. Other departments in SCF, such as pediatrics, dental, etc., also provide care through a similar team-based structure. SCF also maintains its Functional Committee Structure, a group of four standing committees made up of employees from across the organization who have the authority to make changes without needing to consult senior leadership.



## | Interpersonal Relationships

"There is something very powerful about feeling heard, being known, and also knowing that everyone has a story with light and darkness that has shaped who they are."

*Nuka System of Care conference attendee*



## Interpersonal Relationships

“I am learning to be a better father and break the cycle of abuse.”

– Father, Family Wellness Warriors training participant



- Outcome and process measures continually evaluated and improved. SCF continually tracks both measures related to customer-owner health and system performance, to determine service and organizational effectiveness. Aggregate data about customer-owner health, without Protected Health Information, is used by SCF to assess care team performance and determine where improvements need to be made. This data, along with other measures for process and quality improvement, is available on SCF’s Data Mall, an internal system that any

employee can use to support improvement projects. SCF is transparent with data so that different areas of the organization can learn from what is working well.

- Not complicated but simple and easy to use. SCF works to ensure an experience that is customer friendly. SCF provides options to customer-owners so they can access care conveniently; for example, telehealth options for customer-owners. SCF also offers MyHealth, an online system customer-owners can use to access information about upcoming appointments, clinical record

summaries, certain lab results (excluding sensitive results that need to be discussed with their provider), and more.

- Services are financially sustainable and viable. SCF focuses on controlling costs as much as possible while providing high-quality care for customer-owners. SCF places focus on primary care and partnering with customer-owners to improve their overall wellness so that health problems (that require more costly care such as Emergency Room or Urgent Care) are less likely to develop. In the five years after establishing SCF’s Nuka System of Care, SCF saw a 44% decrease in ER visits. ER visits are currently below the 75th percentile for the Healthcare Effectiveness Data Information Set (HEDIS)’s benchmarks where lower is better.

- Hub of the system is the family. Based on community feedback, SCF places focus on family wellness, making it one of its four corporate goals. To support family wellness, SCF empanels families to the same provider. By fostering relationships with families in health care, providers are able to build lasting relationships with customer-owners and future generations. SCF has many programs and services dedicated to family wellness. SCF operates the New Generations project, which is designed to promote the wellness of customer-owner children, from birth to 8 years old, by engaging the community and creating a coordinated system approach to support overall wellness. SCF also implemented the Aging Well initiative, which aims to promote wellness and optimize care for Elder customer-owners.



“This was one of the most rewarding experiences of my life both personally and professionally.”

– Health care professional, Family Wellness Warriors training participant

• Interests of customer-owners drive the system to determine what we do and how we do it. At SCF, change and improvement is driven by customer-owners. SCF continually collects feedback from customer-owners to determine what they want from their health care system, and how the system can change and adapt to provide improved services. SCF has many ways it collects feedback from customer-owners, including post-appointment surveys, a 24-hour hotline, social media, gatherings, advisory committees made up of members of the community, and more. Fifty-five percent of SCF employees are customer-owners. This is strength of SCF as the voice of customer-owner employees is vital to hear when making changes. SCF then incorporates all the feedback into the strategic planning process and various improvement efforts.

• Population-based systems and services. SCF provides many different services to the entire community of customer-owners it serves. Services are designed to ensure capacity can meet the needs of the population. These include various vaccinations and cancer screenings. SCF also maintains a Health Education department, which keeps the community updated on seasonal health information and topics such as the COVID-19 pandemic and offers a variety of programs related to weight loss, tobacco cessation, diabetes education, and more.

• Services and systems build on the strengths of Alaska Native cultures. Every aspect of SCF’s Nuka System of Care is based on Alaska Native cultures and values. The relationship-based care provided by SCF’s Integrated Care Teams is rooted in Alaska

SCF’s Operational Principles are based on the voice of the Alaska Native and American Indian people served by the health care system. One way that new ideas at SCF are evaluated is by determining whether they are in alignment with the Operational Principles. They are always considered before any improvement ideas are acted upon, and if an idea does not align with

the Operational Principles, changes are not made.

SCF’s system of relationship-based care was designed and built by Alaska Native people but maintaining that system in a changing world is challenging. By using the Operational Principles, SCF ensures all changes made to the system are consistent with its vision and mission, and the values of the community it serves.

Health care providers and administrators are invited to learn more about the Nuka System of Care and Core Concepts at the annual Nuka Conference June 12-16, 2023, in Anchorage. For more information, please visit [www.SCFNuka.com](http://www.SCFNuka.com). ■

