

Section 5

Itinerant and Rural Counseling in Alaska

[Written by Marie Fitts, School Counselor in Galena, Alaska. This section reflects the author's personal opinions and suggestions.]

You've landed the job of your dreams...being a rural counselor in Alaska. Maybe you're lucky enough to see more of the state by signing on to be an itinerant counselor. Whether you work in one village, or travel around to five or more sites, you'll encounter challenges and experiences that you would never be exposed to in an urban setting. These few pages have been developed to help you transition more easily into counseling in Alaska bush.

Bush. Alaska is considered the part of Alaska that is not accessible by a road system. There are many villages (small towns) in bush Alaska. They range in size from about ten people to about four thousand.

Outside. refers to the continental US (all of the US but Alaska and Hawaii). If you tell someone you are going 'outside' for the Christmas holiday, they will understand it to mean that you will most likely fly to the "lower 48" for your vacation.

Our state teaching site, the *Alaska Teacher Placement* (www.alaskateacher.org) is an excellent source of information regarding living in Alaska. Go to their "Teaching in Alaska" link for more definitions and details on the adventures of living in bush Alaska.

Realities & Tips for Living In Bush Alaska

1 Housing

What's this bucket for? What? My bathroom? Yes, some of the villages are still without indoor plumbing! You may be told that the housing is excellent. Remember, that 'excellent' to one person may be very different from your own. It's important to ask specific questions so that you don't encounter too many surprises.

Most housing will be heated with either electric or gas. However, you might find that heating with wood is an option in some houses. You may like this option, as the expense of electricity and fuel can be costly in some parts of rural Alaska.

1. Transportation

In many villages you will find that you won't need a vehicle to get around, as there are generally limited roads within the bush. Some teachers/counselors purchase a four-wheeler or a sno-go (snow machine/snow mobile) to get around.

2. Wildlife

No matter what village you move to, more than likely it will have wildlife. Bear, moose, caribou, wolf, fox, coyote, lynx, etc. may be in abundance in some parts of the state. Connect

with the local people to see what wildlife is in your area, and what habits they have that you might need to be aware of for your safety.

3. Connections with the 'outside'

Connections with the 'outside' by telephone and the internet may sometimes be interrupted by weather. Patience and flexibility are important traits to cultivate. Cell phone service is not available in many of the smaller more remote villages.

4. Shopping

Most villages will have at the least a small grocery store for your immediate needs. TIP: By asking around you will soon learn the most economical way to purchase groceries, etc. If you are unable to 'get out' of the village until the Christmas holiday, you might find that ordering personal items and gifts is best done by going on-line. If someone refers to the 'mall' in a village, it is likely that they are referring to the town dump, where individuals sometimes dump off items of value to someone else.

5. Medical Care

Many sites, especially the smaller ones, may have a small clinic for your minor health needs to be addressed. For any serious health issues, you most likely will need to fly to a major hub...sometimes Fairbanks or Anchorage....to have your medical needs met. If you have medications that you take on a regular basis you will want to ask your doctor to prescribe a larger amount than usual. Occasionally the mail service may be interrupted and you don't want to run out of needed medications.

6. Small Communities and Anonymity

If you've ever lived in a small town, you might have an idea as to what to expect in a village in Alaska. Anonymity is not an option. Everyone will want to know who you are and what you are about...and most importantly, if you plan to stay for more than one year!

7. Shorter Days

SAD (Seasonal Affective Disorder) is a reality in bush Alaska. The days get very short and dark as winter quickly sets upon us. If you're someone that needs a lot of sunlight and are prone to depression, investing in a SAD light may help you to cope with the long, dark days of winter.

You may find that some of the students and adults you work with might be greatly affected by this also. Be prepared to offer support and suggestions on how to combat SAD.

8. Crises IN bush communities

You'll find that almost everyone is related to everyone else in a village. Most villagers have family members in the surrounding communities. Extended family members also often live many, many miles beyond the village that you find yourself a part of at the time. Familiarizing yourself with who is related to whom, will assist you when you find yourself working in crisis situations.

9. Tips for the Rural/Itinerant Counselor (Not necessarily in order of importance.)

- + Tip #1 – ASCF – As soon as possible, after you are hired, meet with your supervisor(s) to look at the Alaska School Counseling Framework guidelines of state responsibilities. Discuss how this will fit in your school(s).
- + Tip #2 – Records – Review all records during your first visit to the district, familiarizing yourself with the student needs, background, test scores, etc.
- + Tip #3 – Advisory Committees – should consist of counseling advocates from your village(s) and not from the central office site.
- + Tip #4 – Phone – Connect with the outside world! Agencies are generally willing to offer advice and direction to counselors in rural Alaska. If there isn't a list already developed, spend some time going through the phone book, talking with local mental health individuals, and connect with your mentor to create a list of contacts to help in a variety of situations that you might possibly need assistance.
- + Tip #5 – Community Involvement – Involving yourself in community activities (potlatches, raffles, fund raisers, dances, dog races, etc...) can assist in making you feel like you're a part of the community, which in turn lends itself to connecting with the children at a more personal level.
- + Tip #6 – Logging Information – If you're responsible for more than one village, it's important to keep a communication and e-mail log of counseling issues that come up between visits.
- + Tip #7 – AKCIS – The Alaska Career Information System (www.akcis.org) is one of the best tools available for rural counselors in their career guidance program. It is an extensive internet program that you'll find beneficial in assisting Junior and Senior High School students as you help them explore their career options, and it may be available free of charge. Please see the AKCIS website for details.
- + Tip #8 – Internet – As is alluded to above, the internet is an essential provider of current information in the field of counseling.
- + Tip #9 – Boundaries – At many small sites, teachers will be in need of personal counseling at some point and might try to seek counseling from you, the rural/itinerant counselor. Establish boundaries and a referral network.
- + Tip #10 – Needs Assessment – Provide an initial needs assessment at each village. You may find that the administration and teachers at each site will perceive the needs of one site different from another. The students are best served by addressing the issues that the certified staff sees as concerns.
- + Tips #11 – Counseling Material – In conjunction with Tip #10, meet with every teacher to organize and maintain tubs of material that will be covered over the academic year which tie into the standards.
- + Tip #12 – Home Visits – Try to make a personal visit to each home in your village(s) within three months of initial work in the district. Talk with someone in

the school that knows the community well before making calls, etc. There will be certain protocol for visiting some homes.

- + Tip #13 – Safe Homes – Again, talk with someone in the school setting that is familiar with the community. Ask if there has been a Safe Home, or Safe Homes, established.
- + Tip #14 – Crisis Response – See your district approved crisis response plan. If one has not been established for your site, under the approval and supervision of the building administrator, create a team to come up with a plan.
- + Tip #15 – Involve the Community – Advocate for local village people to become counselor aides.
- + Tip #16 – Classroom Visits – Counselors make an initial contact with classroom teachers to set up best time to meet with his/her students.
- + Tip #17 – Individual and Crisis Counseling – Teachers and/or administrator refer students to Counselor. In crisis situation, teachers and/or administrators refer appropriate students to Counselor. Counselors serve as main contact for the students and/or staff who are most impacted. Counselors provide a “safe space” for mourning students and staff.
- + Tip #18 – Itinerant Counselor Role – Insist that a major problem that demands counseling expertise is not dismissed when the itinerant counselor is absent. Make known that you may be available via audio conference if/when the need arises.
- + Tip #19 – Itinerant Availability – Students should use an itinerant counselor like a hotline service. A student should be able to call a counselor collect if the student feels he/she might need assistance before the counselor’s next scheduled visit. Communicating via e-mail can also be helpful...just remember that e-mail is not confidential.
- + Topics may include: Academic success; Anger management/conflict; Attention deficit techniques; Divorce; Eating disorders; Suicidal ideation (most critical to assess and address immediately); Grief/loss; School attendance; Self-confidence; Self-esteem; Sexual issues; Substance abuse issues; Underachievement
- + Tip #20 – Local Law Enforcement – Most sites will have a VPSO or another form of law enforcement. Make sure that they are aware of the mandatory 72-hour hospital intakes for serious suicidal behavior.
- + Tip #21 – Laptop – If you’re an itinerant counselor, request a laptop to carry with you from site to site so that you may have your programs and essential notes readily available to you.
- + Tip #22 – Career Fairs – Organize, fundraise and obtain grants for career fairs in such hubs as Anchorage, Juneau or Fairbanks.
- + Tip #23 – Evaluation – Make evaluations in April to share and brainstorm solutions with the village(s) in May.

Personal Support

Critical to your professional success in rural Alaska is figuring out how to best take care of yourself. As the school counselor, you might find that you may be called upon to be available at all hours, not just for the school students and staff, but also for community members. Discussion with your immediate supervisor is critical for your own mental health and well-being. For example, if you work late with a family on a child's issue, compensation should be requested (i.e. Going into work later the next day) so that you don't find yourself burning the candle at both ends and ultimately burning yourself out.

Below is a partial list of things that you could do for you that might help maintain a healthy balance of life in the bush:

10. Investment in your own **SAD** light.
11. If you are an animal lover at all, a **pet** will make the long dark days of Alaska winters more bearable.
12. Keep in touch with family and friends by phone and on the internet. You may find that this will be your greatest support!
13. Connect with another counselor outside of your village that can be your **mentor**. Someone you feel comfortable calling when you need to process your day, or have questions that you're having a tough time getting answered.
14. Involvement in the community lends itself to much support from community members. The more you attend community events, the more you can develop levels of trust with the people.
15. Set boundaries....it is okay to take time off when you need it!
16. Have a movie night with some of the staff...show videos/DVDs (Comedies are highly recommended!) Offer free popcorn and soda.