

January 28, 2021

North Slope Borough residents,

Quyasugtigu nuttaaq ukkiuq – Happy New Year! It feels refreshing to turn the page on 2020 in what was truly a year unlike any other. We were faced with an abundance of challenges that tested our resilience, strength and unity. From a worldwide pandemic that further isolated our communities and a fire that destroyed Harold Kaveelook School in Kaktovik, to the passing of some of the North Slope's most influential leaders – it was a very difficult 12 months. But we should take pride in how we came together as a region, supported each other and persevered in adapting to a “new normal”. We should commend one another for progressing in the face of adversity.

Over the last year, Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat (VOICE) has worked on many important issues brought forth by North Slope communities to ensure local engagement in decisions that affect the future of the region and the well-being of its people. We worked not only to be heard, but also to play an active role in overcoming challenges and pursuing objectives that make the North Slope a better place to live, learn, work and subsist. We would like to highlight some of the issues we engaged in and the progress we made in 2020 toward helping to ensure a region that's healthy, prosperous and culturally grounded.

### NEW VOICE MEMBERS

Part of what allows VOICE to make meaningful contributions to decisions affecting Arctic communities is its diverse membership, which is comprised of tribes, Native regional and village corporations, local nonprofits, health care and educational institutions, and others such as the North Slope Borough. Last year, VOICE was proud to welcome the Iñupiat Community of the Arctic Slope (ICAS) and the Native Village of Barrow as new members, both of which played important roles in many of our efforts. The addition of these organizations brings VOICE's membership total to 24.

### COVID-19 RESOURCES

The year 2020 will be remembered for the global coronavirus outbreak that resulted in the most severe public health emergency in more than 100 years. In March, when the World Health Organization declared the outbreak a pandemic, VOICE moved quickly to compile and disseminate information from federal agencies such as the Center for Disease Control, as well as the State of Alaska, to the North Slope public.

With a locally-focused approach to COVID-19 communications, VOICE worked with Arctic Slope Native Association, ICAS, Utqiagvik Mayor's office and others to discuss coronavirus measures to mitigate exposure and keep communities safe. We communicated regularly with the North Slope Borough as well as individual villages to keep the region informed about resolutions, executive orders, travel information and available health resources.

As schools closed, businesses shuttered and air carriers were grounded, it became clear that COVID-19 posed a threat not only to the health of our people, but also to the local economy, supply chain, and effectiveness of tribal and educational institutions. VOICE researched federal aid opportunities through the CARES Act and Coronavirus Relief Fund, as well as grants and relief assistance for tribes and small businesses. We communicated aid information to our members and created an exhaustive COVID-19 page on our website as a go-to information resource for the North Slope.

In 2021, VOICE will continue to actively monitor pandemic responses, regional vaccine availability, and communicate opportunities North Slope entities can pursue to help alleviate the effects of COVID-19. For more information visit [voiceofthearcticinupiat.org](http://voiceofthearcticinupiat.org).

### BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETINGS

Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat held two board of directors meetings in 2020. In January, the board met for the first time in Point Hope – home to VOICE headquarters and several of its member organizations. Governor Mike Dunleavy attended and participated, in what was his first visit to the community, along with the commissioners from Health and Social Services as well as Education and Early Development.

Other meeting guests included executives with the United States Postal Service (USPS). Improvements to the North Slope's bypass mail system has been a board priority and VOICE worked diligently in 2020 advocating for changes to the system. The USPS presented the board with improvement updates, including standardized reports to streamline communications between hubs, air carriers and shippers as well as added personnel to monitor mail flow.

In November, the board held its first virtual-only meeting in order to mitigate any negative health impacts associated with travel and in-person gatherings during COVID-19. The board meeting covered updates from 2020 – many of which are covered in this letter – and allowed members to set priority issues and goals for the

coming year. Despite a virtual atmosphere, the board meeting was as meaningful, collaborative and productive as any in our six years as an organization.

### ALASKA AIR CARRIERS ASSOCIATION CONVENTION & TRADESHOW

In March, VOICE was involved in the Alaska Air Carriers Association & Tradeshow in Anchorage as part of its ongoing North Slope Air Carriers Partnership. VOICE participated as a member of the Reliable Customer Service Panel – an open dialogue on issues that affect communities, including ticket prices, infrastructure, and passenger and mail service. We took the opportunity to present concerns and offer suggestions brought forth by our membership and the North Slope public to improve services to rural Alaska.

VOICE's involvement at the convention was a result of its own 2019 workshop with the Alaska Air Carriers Association (AACA) and ten air carriers, including Alaska Airlines, Northern Air Cargo and others.

### TRIBAL BROADBAND SPECTRUM

A lack of affordable, high-speed internet available to North Slope communities continues to hinder the quality of education for children, access to timely medical services for residents, and the sustainability of local businesses. The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened the importance of Arctic broadband as remote learning, telemedicine and e-commerce capabilities have become a necessity.

In July 2019, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) opened its Rural Tribal Priority Window, allowing American Indian and Alaska Native tribes to apply for unlicensed FCC broadband spectrum on their lands at no cost. The program gives ownership rights to approved applicants, and has the ability to establish or greatly expand high-speed internet access to communities across the region.

In 2020, VOICE partnered with ICAS to pursue FCC licensing. We worked with tribal organizations to increase awareness around the federal program and hosted teleconferences with the FCC and tribes. On July 24, ICAS submitted a broadband spectrum application covering the entire North Slope. Currently in the final approval process, the license would provide tribally-owned broadband that has the potential to improve the lives of residents across the region. VOICE will continue to support these efforts and be an active resource throughout the post-application process.

### ARCTIC COAST PORT ACCESS ROUTE STUDY

Another one of VOICE's 2020 priorities was to actively participate in the development of the Arctic Coast Port Access Route Study. Two years ago, the Department of Homeland Security and U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) began conducting a study to connect the Arctic with the Bering Strait Access Route, which will ultimately help set rules for shipping and travel through Arctic waters.

VOICE established a working group to assist the USCG and North Slope Borough Wildlife Department gather data and information from communities for public comment, and to support the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission (AEWC) in their efforts to help the government determine the most appropriate Arctic route.

Some of the goals of the Port Access Route Study working group are to learn from the Bering Straits route process, gather sufficient data and input to make sound recommendations, ensure appropriate protections for marine mammal habitat, and work closely with the AEWC to protect whalers and subsistence usage.

### OUR VOICE. OUR VISION.

It's been a busy and challenging year, and Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat has worked hard to represent our membership, and the region as a whole, by making meaningful contributions to issues and programs that have the potential to impact our communities.

In 2020, VOICE continued its work on the NPR-A Impact Mitigation Grant Program, advocating to protect it against State of Alaska budget cuts and educating communities on how to successfully receive funding through the program. We partnered with our Alaska delegation in DC to fight elimination of Alaska's bypass mail program; continued efforts to ensure that our Kaktovik members were heard and respected in the discussion about ANWR; raised concerns with the Alaska Federation of Natives regarding resolutions amending ANCSA; supported regional infrastructure improvements and development like the ASTAR program and affordable housing initiatives; and much more.

Despite the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, an unstable economy and significant job losses impacting the region, VOICE enters 2021 with tremendous cause for optimism. As we usher in a new president and his administration, and state lawmakers convene in Juneau for the 32nd Legislature, we have the opportunity to build the bright future we envision for the North Slope. We have the ability to be involved, work together and speak as one on issues important to our communities. We will forever be remembered for the work we undertake today and the positive impact our efforts have on future generations.

Quyanaqpak,



Sayers Tuzroyluk  
President, Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat