

**HEALTHY ALASKANS 2030  
PHOTOVOICE PROJECT:  
MYHOUSE YOUNG ADULTS**  
January 2022



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Prepared by Actionable Data Consulting for Healthy Alaskans 2030.

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## **Acknowledgement**

*Thank you to the staff and young people from MyHouse for sharing their voices and amazing photos.*

## PHOTOVOICE

In June 2021, Healthy Alaskans (HA) 2030 contracted with Melissa Toffolon, MPH, PhD to conduct a photovoice project with group(s) whose health experience is reflected in the HA 2030 priority objectives. The opportunity to receive photovoice training and participate was then advertised throughout the Tribal and non-Tribal Public Health System in Alaska. Staff at MyHouse in Wasilla, Alaska expressed interest in participating. The project was conducted in December 2021.

This project used Photovoice to gather input and insights from those with lived experience of an HA priority topic area to help direct and shape strategy and action work. Photovoice is an activity where a group comes together to explore questions using photos and create corresponding captions.

The young adults participating in this project met two times to complete project. In the first meeting, they learned about Photovoice, saw examples of its use in another project, discussed the questions to be explored, and learned about the guidelines for taking photos. Consent forms were distributed to the participants for use when they take photos of children and adults. Additionally, the participants each signed a consent form to allow their photos and captions to be used for this project.

At the second meeting, the participants viewed each other's photos and captions and discussed themes that emerged when looking at all the photos. They also discussed the health

and wellness challenges they faced that were not captured in the photos.

The young adults texted the group leader photos and captions in between the two meetings and during the second meeting. The group leader then put together this report and developed the pictures to be used for an exhibit to be held at MyHouse in early 2022.

## PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

The group was composed of eight young adults who gathered at MyHouse. MyHouse is a nonprofit organization with the following mission, *“That all youth experiencing homelessness and youth at risk of becoming homeless, are empowered to be contributing, self-supporting members of their community.”* The organization provides safe shelter and wrap-around services for youth with a “hand-up,” not a “hand-out,” philosophy.

All but one participant was female. The average age of the participants was 21 years old. All had completed high school, and one had attended some college. The majority were employed (5), one was doing an internship, and two were unemployed. Three of the participants identified themselves as white, two were Alaska Native people, two were mixed-race people (Alaska Native/white), and one identified as a Hawaiian person. The communities where the participants grew up were diverse, including Mat-Su, Wasilla, Meadow Lakes, Selawik, Seattle, and Anchorage. All the participants currently live in the Mat-Su Borough.

## COMMON THEMES

The young adults took photos to explore the following questions:

1. *What in your life is supportive to your health/well-being?*
2. *What in your life is challenging to your health/well-being?*

The major themes of the photos that the MyHouse group took were:

1. Building Resilience
2. Supportive Social Connection
3. Emotional Support from Nature
4. Healthy Nutrition
5. Harm from Tobacco
6. Work
7. Domestic Violence

The participants were also asked what are issues that were NOT seen in the photos that were taken that are important to their health and wellbeing. One participant said that she worked at a place where they could take a paid hour a week to go on a walk or do another “wellness activity.” Other participants mentioned that reading books is healthy. There was also discussion about how “Body Positivity” is healthy. Body Positivity is the assertion that all people deserve to have a positive body image regardless of the messages that society sends about how someone should look.

One person who struggles with addiction noted that there are too many alcohol outlets in her community and if a person is turned away at one bar, they can easily go down the street and drink at another bar. Another participant mentioned a picture from another Photovoice project that showed used hypodermic needles. She said that seeing those needles on the ground as a child was her first exposure to drugs.

Finally, there was much discussion about the positive and negative effects of social media. The positive effects that were mentioned include using it to find out information (like new recipes), to be a good distraction sometimes, and to keep in touch with family and friends. The negative effects included that it could make one feel like they are missing out because people always post themselves doing fun and amazing things and seldom post their “low points.” Another person mentioned that it can be a “time suck.” Another participant said that it matters which social media tool you use, and they mentioned that they saw a very scary video on Twitter and they don’t like to use that app. A young person said that social media can be dangerous, especially for young people. She said her sister was communicating with a stranger who lied about their age. She fears that social media could be used to kidnap or harm young people.

The themes that came up in the Photovoice project overlapped with seven objectives identified as Healthy Alaskans 2030 Priority Health Objectives. These objectives are identified in each Theme section below.

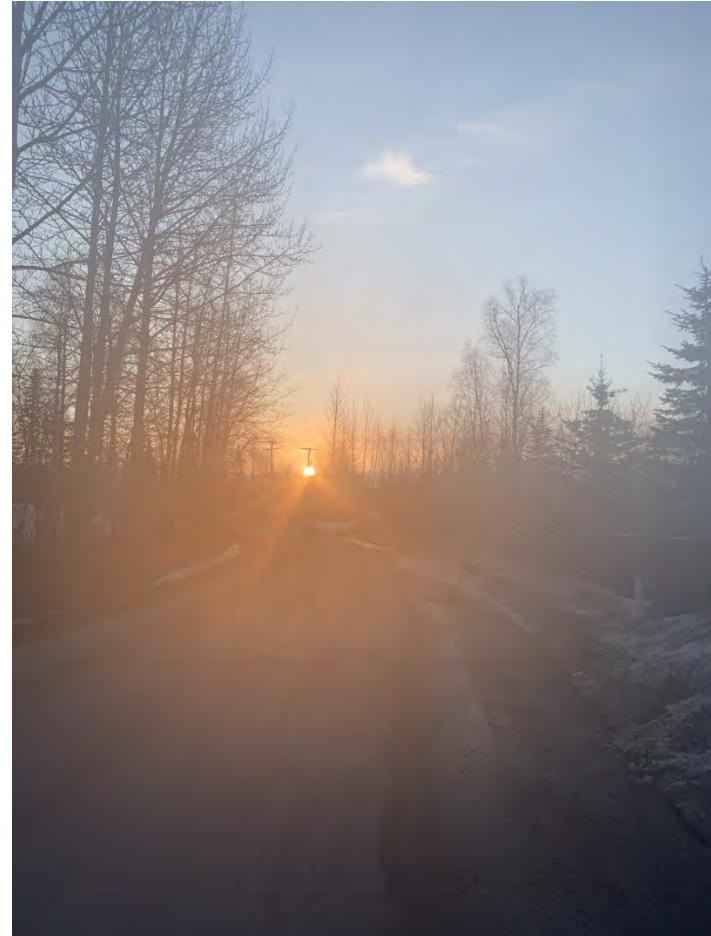
## THEME #1: BUILDING RESILIENCE

Resilience is defined as *“the ability to become strong, healthy, or successful again after something bad happens.”*<sup>1</sup> Often this is a term that is used as a positive characteristic of mental health.

Mental health issues were present in the following Healthy Alaskans 2030 Priority Health Objectives.

- *Reduce the mean number of days in the past 30 days adults (18 years or older) report being mentally unhealthy.*
- *Reduce the percentage of adolescents (high school students in grades 9-12) who felt so sad or hopeless every day for two weeks or more in a row that they stopped doing some usual activities during the last 12 months.*

The captions for the pictures refer to how the participants try to overcome mental health challenges.



*“Hope.”*

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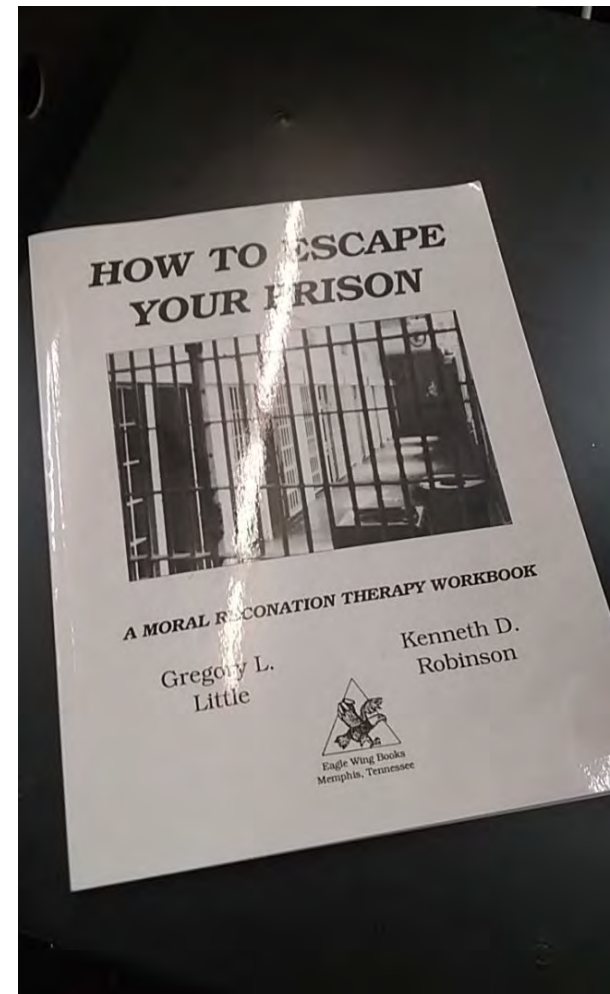
<sup>1</sup> Merriam-Webster. “Resilience.” 27 December 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/resilience>.



*"I feel like no matter what had happened in my life, and no matter who left, I was still there for me. I got back up after all the waves and came out of it all, overall, a better person. I'm thankful for all the people I've met and the experience I've had. I'm thankful to be here."*



*"Having my kids helped me grow up and saved me."*



*"This is a book from Moral Reconciliation Therapy (MRT). It's a class in treatment that I take. This is both a challenge and helpful, as I'm struggling with addiction, so I am getting help to recover."*



*“Keep growing, even when you are feeling weak.”*

## **THEME #2: SUPPORTIVE CONNECTION**

A supportive connection between two people is one in which each person feels seen, heard, and known. These connections are crucial for youth and young adults as they develop and find their way in the world.

This theme was present in the Healthy Alaskans 2030 Priority Health Objectives. The theme of personal connection that MyHouse young adults identified relates to the following objectives:

- *Increase the percentage of adolescents (high school students in grades 9-12) with three or more adults (besides their parent(s)) who they feel comfortable seeking help from.*
- *Increase the percentage of adolescents (high school students in grades 9-12) who feel like they matter to people in the community.*





*"Love is everywhere; you just have to look."*



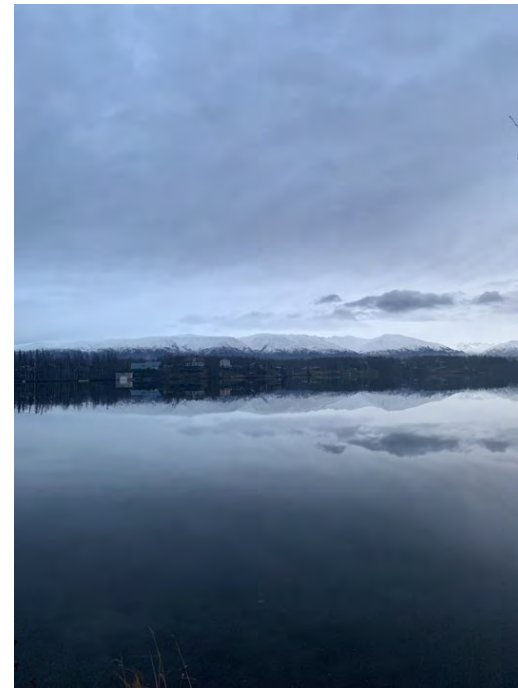
*"These are my coworkers and me. They are helpful to my well-being and health because we all make a great team. They are easy to work with, and we've become friends over the period of working together. So, I have people to talk to if I need."*



*“My boyfriend Tyler’s face is good health because it is really healthy to have at least one or two deeply connected relationships. You get so many benefits from having a companion, whether that person is platonic or not. The connectedness you have during the holidays is amazing.”*

### **THEME #3: WORK**

Work was mentioned as a theme by two people. One felt that his job contributed positively to his life, and the other, a new parent, was frustrated that employers did not consider the personal needs of the workers and their families.



*“This picture is from a morning walk to my first day of work. This job helps me get out of the house and be interactive.”*



*“Employers complain about no one wanting to work when in reality they are forgetting that employees are people with lives outside of work, not robots – (they are making difficult demands that are hard to meet when you have children).”*

#### **THEME #4: EMOTIONAL SUPPORT FROM NATURE**

Several pictures of nature were submitted. The young adults said they liked to “get away” to nature to relax and restore themselves. Nature photographs were also used to represent a concept or idea.



*“I was out fishing, and it was a nice picture – looking back, it was a nice get away from personal issues I had.”*



*"Being outdoors can help support physical, emotional, and spiritual health."*



*"Look at us laying here, spreading bright and colorful joy this time of year." OR "Death can be beautiful."*



*"There is always something worth noticing."*



*"Shining bright is always a delight."*

### THEME #4: HEALTHY NUTRITION

The theme of healthy nutrition came up only once, in the photograph and caption of a Kombucha bottle.



*“Kombucha is good for the gut – from 203 Kombucha bar in Palmer where they sell an assortment of fermented teas with different flavors. They also sell coffee, avocado toast, cinnamon sugar toast, almond butter ‘n jelly toast, and juice along with having an art show that you yourself can sell art and be a part of.”*

### THEME #5: HARMS OF TOBACCO USE

The theme of the harms of tobacco use came up only once in this photo and caption of a water pipe. While a water pipe can be used to smoke marijuana, the young adult who submitted it wanted to highlight the dangers of tobacco use.

Healthy Alaskans 2030 has the following related objectives:

- Reduce the percentage of adolescents (high school students in grades 9-12) who have used electronic vapor products, cigarettes, smokeless tobacco, or other tobacco products in the last 30 days.
- Reduce the percentage of adults (18 and older) who currently smoke cigarettes or use electronic vapor products, smokeless tobacco, or other tobacco products.



*“The Rick water pipe is an example of something that is unhealthy. Smoking tobacco is always going to be bad for you. It causes many forms of health problems.”*

## THEME #6: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

The theme of domestic violence was mentioned by one participant and it relates to the following Healthy Alaskans 2030 priority objective:

- *Reduce the percentage of adolescents (high school students in grades 9-12) who were ever hit, slammed into something, injured with an object or weapon, or physically hurt on purpose by someone they were dating or going out with during the past 12 months.*



*“My birth family is really violent and aggressive, and I have learned how to distance myself from that to be healthy. Domestic violence is a big issue, but not a lot of people want to talk about it.”*

## SUMMARY

This Photovoice project involved eight young adults who are connected with MyHouse, an organization in the Matanuska Susitna Borough that supports homeless youth and young adults to be empowered and self-supporting members of the community. Focusing on the following questions, *“What in your life is supportive to your health/well-being?”* And *“What in your life is challenging to your health/wellbeing?”* the young people used photos and descriptive captions to come up with “answers.”

Most of the pictures and captions focused on the things, people, and experiences that keep them going and help them be resilient and healthy. The two most common themes were the importance of being connected to others and identifying emotional support as it is reflected and supported by being outside in nature. They also took pictures that told of their journeys that led to resilience such as having children, addressing addiction, and being a survivor of domestic violence. Additionally, challenges made their way into the pictures, like finding work that fits with their childcare responsibilities, the harms of tobacco use, and struggling with addiction.

Themes that were not represented in the photos but were discussed as important were the positive and negative effects of social media and the importance of body image positivity. Many of the themes focused on in this project relate to the Healthy Alaskans 2030 priority objectives – experiencing

depression and poor mental health, the need for social connection, exposure to violence, and the use of tobacco.