

# Grant Approval Memo



**Grantee:** Wrangell Mountains Center  
**Request Amount:** \$10,000.00  
**Project Title:** Saghani Ggaay (Young Raven) Alaska Native Youth Camp  
**Grant Term:** 6/1/2026 to 9/1/2026  
**Trust Staff:** Heather Phelps

## **Staff Analysis:**

- **What does this project do?**  
Trust funds will pay for the operational costs of the Saghani Ggaay Alaska Native Youth Camp, which will serve up to 15 Alaska Native students in the Copper River Basin who are at increased risk of becoming Trust beneficiaries. Operational costs include covering a portion of facility cost, portions of contract work, and a small (\$400.00) indirect cost.
- **Who is receiving the funds?**  
The Wrangell Mountains Center is an education nonprofit located in McCarthy, Alaska. Since the 1970s, the Center has provided experiential education programming that fosters discovery through direct contact with diverse environments. The camp is made possible through a coalition of partners, each contributing distinct strengths in service of youth and regional healing and includes Wrangell Mountains Center, Copper River Native Association (CRNA), Raven Moonlight, and Ahtna Elders.
- **Why is staff recommending this project?**  
The Saghani Ggaay Alaska Native Youth Camp will serve up to 15 Alaska Native students. Saghani Ggaay seeks to serve Alaska Native youth in the Copper River Basin who are at increased risk of becoming Trust beneficiaries through Indigenous-led, preventive programming that focuses on cultural continuity and connection to ancestral lands. Saghani Ggaay is designed to counteract the higher likelihood of adverse health outcomes by centering Indigenous leadership, reciprocity, and care, and by creating a culturally safe space for Alaska Native youth to reconnect with the land, strengthen identity, and build relationships that support both individual well-being and community healing. Trust investment helps strengthen and scale a promising program with demonstrated demand and strong community support.
- **Will this be a multi-year project?**  
This is a one-time funding request. After a successful pilot in 2025, the intention is to make this an annually offered program. The project has a layered funding approach and a collaborative relationship between partner organizations to ensure the program is resilient and sustainable from year to year.

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## **Trust Five Year Funding History**

No Trust grants during this period

## **Comp Plan Identification**

Area of Focus	Objective	Comments
Area of Focus 1: Early Childhood & Youth	1.2 Ensure accurate identification and support of social-emotional needs for children and their families, congruent with their cultural identification	

## **Trust Focus Area Connection**

Budget Area	Strategy	Comments
Early Childhood & Youth	Early Childhood - Ensure accurate identification and treatment of social-emotional needs for children, youth, and their caregivers	

## **Project Description (from grant application)**

Saghani Ggaay is a culturally-grounded Prevention & Early Intervention project designed to serve Alaska Native Youth of the Copper River Basin for its second year. This proposal will make possible an Indigenous-led gathering inviting Alaska Native youth home to the traditional lands of the Ahtna Athabascan people to heal, remember, and grow through land, culture, and Elders' teachings. The camp will be hosted on the traditional lands of the Ahtna people within the Copper River Basin, at the Wrangell Mountains Center in McCarthy, Alaska. This place holds deep cultural meaning and history, where Ahtna people were displaced during colonial development. Returning Native youth to this land - now exclusively occupied by non-Native residents - will not only support increased youth wellness, but also community relationships and healing that will promote cultural integrity and health moving forward. Reconnecting to place, regaining knowledge, and restoring respect for land and self are critical in creating stronger health outcomes for youth carrying intergenerational trauma.

This proposal is intentionally built through relationships and aligned values, recognizing that meaningful healing and learning occur through trust, shared responsibility, and Indigenous leadership. The camp is made possible through a coalition of partners, each contributing distinct strengths in service of youth and regional healing. Copper River Native Association (CRNA) provides facilitation, community relationships, and youth engagement; Raven Moonlight NPO contributes Indigenous leadership, cultural revitalization, and traditional healing curriculum; Ahtna Elders guide the work through lived knowledge and responsibility; and the Wrangell Mountains Center (WMC) provides the infrastructure and safety system needed to host a residential camp in a remote location. This distinction allows our Indigenous partners to lead the work without operational burden, ensuring cultural authority remains with Indigenous leaders, while safety and operations are reliably managed

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by our professional staff. While we, as the WMC, are directly applying for this grant, we do so as a means of supporting this partnership and we created this proposal in direct collaboration with, and leadership from, our Indigenous partner organizations.

The collaborating organizations involved in this project understand youth wellness is inseparable from culture, land, and community relationships, particularly in the context of historic displacement and intergenerational trauma. We also understand that Alaska Native populations experience higher prevalence of substance use disorders, unintentional injury, mental illness, and certain risk behaviors that threaten the well-being of individuals and families (1). Saghaani Ggaay is designed to counteract higher likelihood of adverse health outcomes through centering Indigenous leadership, reciprocity, and care, and creating a culturally safe space for Alaska Native youth to reconnect with land, strengthen identity, and build relationships that support both individual wellbeing and community healing.

In 2025, during the Saghani Ggaay Pilot Program, the curriculum was planned by Sonia Vent, of Raven Moonlight, using guidance from a group of Alaska Native Elders, the Cultural Identity Curriculum (Dr. Sara Buckingham, UAA), and the paper Guiding the Narrative: Ethical Guide Training and Indigenous Representation in Alaska Tourism (Heather Reiss, APU). The Indigenous Instructors led the youth through clans and family tree learning, a cultural identity workshop, energy and traditional healing, sweat lodge building, plant identification, salve making, and more, all culminating in a traditional Potlatch which the larger McCarthy community was invited to join, and which was a meaningful event for all. Saghani Ggaay 2026 will follow a similar curriculum with some changes based on what was learned during the pilot summer.

As part of program impact evaluation in 2025, all youth were given pre and post surveys to better understand their relationship to cultural connection, understanding of their Ahtna Athabaskan cultural heritage, and if the curriculum impacted these aspects. Data collected reported that 81% of survey responses improved when taking into account that some had no room for improvement (i.e. they already reported the highest possible result in their pre survey.) Participants starting with the lowest scores grew the most, while every single participant improved overall. This positive impact, in addition to positive feedback from those involved, has led to all organizational partners committing themselves to making Saghani Ggaay a recurring program.

(1) Healthy Alaskans 2030 State Health Assessment: <https://www.healthyalaskans.org/reports/state-health-assessment/>

## **Grantee Proposed Evaluation Measures (from grant application)**

We intend to recruit the majority of students from the Copper River Basin, including but not limited to the six compacted Ahtna Villages---Cantwell, Gakona, Gulkana, Kluti-Kaah, Mentasta, and Tazlina, directly served by CRNA. CRNA will lead the recruitment through their relationship with the Copper River School District. During our pilot year we served 9 students, and we will measure our increased impact by our goal to fill all 15 available spots. The Ahtna Tribes are spread over 28,000 square miles and with a population of roughly 3,000 people. Supporting 15–20 high school-aged Alaska Native youth represents a meaningful portion of the region’s emerging leaders.

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In 2025 our program evaluation methods consisted of a pre-and post-program assessment survey, mentioned above in our project narrative. The assessment asked questions about connections to Ahtna Athabascan cultural traditions, community, and homeland. They also invited input on the program itself. Comparing responses from the pre and post assessments from 2025, results were overwhelmingly positive, and we intend to use this measure again in 2026. Inclusion of survey-based assessment allows us to make data-driven decisions between program years, and these results will also be used to make any changes to the curriculum for the upcoming summer. In addition to survey data, we also collected anecdotes to track impact and will do this again in 2026. Below is an example of one student who shared important feedback that spoke to the impact this program had on him:

“Attending the Saghani Ggaay Youth Camp was an unforgettable experience that deepened my understanding of our culture and gave me the opportunity to connect with others in a meaningful way...we shared stories, songs, dances, and food—each element helping to pass down knowledge that has been carried by our ancestors for generations. What made the camp special was the sense of unity and pride it inspired in all of us. Being surrounded by others who wanted to learn and celebrate our heritage made me feel more connected to my identity. It reminded me how important it is to preserve and share our culture...The Saghani Ggaay Youth Camp was more than just a fun gathering—it was a meaningful experience that strengthened our community and kept our traditions alive.”

Through these means we will use both qualitative and quantitative data to assess our performance and improve our program from year to year.

## **Proposed Project Performance Measures (developed by the Trust)**

How much did you do?

Number (#) of unduplicated youth participating in the Saghani Ggaay (Young Raven) Youth Camp program.

How well did you do it?

Program effectiveness will be assessed using pre- and post-surveys. At least 80% of the youth will (a) better understand their relationship to cultural connection, (b) better understand their Ahtna Athabascan cultural heritage, and (c) positively correlate the curriculum with their increased understanding of (a) and (b).

Is anyone better off?

Two statements from participants describing how the program impacted them personally.

## **Sustainability (from grant application)**

After a successful pilot in 2025, this program is continuing in 2026 with the support of our collaborating partners, and we aspire to make it yearly programming. Last year the project was predominantly funded through an Alaska State Council on the Arts Health and Wellness Pilot Program

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grant, in addition to support from Rural Cap and Ahtna Inc., and much in-kind donated staff time by CRNA, Raven Moonlight, WMC, and private individuals invested in Saghani Ggaay's mission. The program's pilot year would not have been possible without State and Tribal funding, partner contributions, and in-kind support. This layered funding approach and collaborative relationship between partner organizations will allow us to continue to source funding, making this program resilient and sustainable from year to year. With the effort spread across multiple organizations and the ability to pull support from diverse networks, we are confident in our collective ability to offer Saghani Ggaay to Native youth on a yearly basis.

The long-term goals of this program are expansive and interwoven. While our primary beneficiaries are the Alaska Native youth of the Copper River Basin, building thriving Alaska Native communities that uphold their cultural identity, and addressing unresolved trauma from forced displacement from the ancestral homelands that McCarthy/Kennicott now exist within, will have positive ripple effects outside of the target population. The same cultural continuity that will support youth wellbeing can do the same for adults, and improve the relations between all of our communities as we work to make Alaska a better place for all to live. This work happens slowly, and thinking holistically over the long-term is integral to the community-level healing that will promote better health outcomes for all.

## **Who We Serve (from grant application)**

The 2023 Key Issues Impacting Alaska Mental Health Trust Beneficiaries: Alaska Scorecard (1) states, "Tribal communities, which carry a greater burden of negative health outcomes, experience social connections as interwoven with other protective factors through the sharing of resources, responsibilities, cultural knowledge, and connections to ancestors and the land." In addition, we understand the strong correlation between Alaska Native youth struggling in high school and a higher risk of developing mental health disorders or substance abuse disorders. In the Copper River Basin, recent studies show that residents in the region are not meeting baseline targets for a variety of key health indicators, including the "percentage of adolescents who felt so sad or hopeless every day for 2 weeks or more in a row that they stopped doing some usual activities during the past 12 months," with a current score of 34.6% (statewide target less than 25.7%) (2). Therefore, Saghani Ggaay seeks to serve Alaska Native youth in the Copper River Basin, at increased risk of becoming Trust beneficiaries, through Indigenous-led, preventative programming that focuses on cultural continuity and connection to ancestral lands.

Cultural competence is paramount to serving the mental health needs of Indigenous populations. In a recent review in the *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, researchers examined to what extent care and connection within Indigenous cultural engagement contributes to the positive psychological well-being of Indigenous youth. They reviewed 25 studies with a total sample size of 19,231 participants. 72% of the studies reported a significant positive relationship between cultural engagement and psychological well-being (3). Likewise, a specific qualitative result from another study on this topic found that the "development of cultural identity through positive relationships, opportunities to participate in activities, cultural learning, (and) affirmation of cultural background was associated with increased personal growth, (and) self-confidence" (4).

Saghani Ggaay is led by Indigenous organizations, Elders, and cultural instructors who design and deliver all program content, outreach, and relationship-building. The camp focuses on strengthening identity for youth separated from their lands, language, and cultural responsibilities through historic

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displacement. Reconnecting to place, regaining knowledge, and restoring respect for land and self are critical for youth carrying intergenerational trauma, proven both through current research and also identified as a need, and supported by, the Ahtna Elders involved in the creation of this endeavor. This proposal seeks to increase positive wellbeing for youth through Indigenous-led cultural connection, with the specific goals of contributing to their personal growth, self confidence, and overall mental health. Through this goal, our program will be a preventative measure to lessen the likelihood that engaged youth become Trust Beneficiaries.

(1) <https://health.alaska.gov/media/muug2v10/2023-alaskascorecard.pdf>

(2) Healthy Alaskans 2020 Interior Scorecard: [https://www.healthalaskans.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/HA2020\\_Scorecard\\_Interior.pdf](https://www.healthalaskans.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/HA2020_Scorecard_Interior.pdf)

(3) Doery, E., Satyen, L., Paradies, Y., & Toumbourou, J. W. (2022). The Relationship Between Cultural Engagement and Psychological Well-being Among Indigenous Adolescents: A Systematic Review. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 54(1), 90-113. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00220221221128215> (Original work published 2023)

(4) Crooks C. V., Exner-Corten D., Burm S., Lapointe A., Chiodo D. (2016). Two years of relationship-focused mentoring for First Nations, Metis, and Inuit adolescents: Promoting positive mental health. *Journal of Primary Prevention*, 38(1-2), 87–104.

## **Estimated Numbers of Beneficiaries Served Experiencing (from grant application)**

This project serves up to 15 youth at risk of becoming Trust beneficiaries.

Mental Illness:	0
Developmental Disabilities:	0
Alzheimer’s Disease & Related Dementias:	0
Substance Abuse	0
Traumatic Brain Injuries:	0
Secondary Beneficiaries (family members or caregivers providing support to primary beneficiaries):	0
Number of people to be trained	0

## **Project Budget (from grant application)**

Space or Facilities Costs	\$4,000.00
Space or Facilities Costs (Other Sources)	\$10,000.00

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Space or Facilities Narrative	The total cost of WMC campus use for the 7 day camp is \$14,000, of which \$4,000 is requested and \$10,000 is contributed through a pending Alaska Community Foundation Grant. Campus use includes lodging, meals, kitchens, classrooms, gathering spaces, and on-site staff required to host a residential camp safely in a remote location which remains a culturally important part of the Ahtna homeland, but today lacks significant Alaska Native presence and any Tribal/Intertribal organization infrastructure.
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Other Costs	\$6,000.00
Other Costs (Other Sources)	\$7,400.00
Other Costs Narrative	<p>Contract:</p> <p>-\$1,600 : This requested sum will support our Indigenous Partners in developing and adjusting the curriculum for this year's camp. In 2025 the curriculum was planned by Raven Moonlight using guidance from a group of Alaska Native Elders, the Cultural Identity Curriculum, by Dr. Sara Buckingham at UAA, and the paper Guiding the Narrative: Ethical Guide Training and Indigenous Representation in Alaska Tourism by Heather Reiss, at APU, which had much of Elder Wilson Justin's guidance throughout. Using our survey feedback from 2025, Raven Moonlight will improve and build upon the curriculum for this years camp.</p> <p>- \$4,000 : We are requesting \$4000 to hire on contract Indigenous Healers, Instructors, and Elder Stipends to lead this programming. The total cost for Indigenous leadership is \$11,000, with \$4000 requested and \$7000 supported through a pending grant proposal through the Alaska Community Foundation.</p> <p>-\$400: We are requesting Indirect costs at 10% of all non contract expenses listed.</p>

## **Other Funding Sources (from grant application)**

Alaska Community Foundation - SECURED	\$20,000.00
Copper River Native Association BIA Funding - SECURED	\$5,100.00
Wrangell Mountains Center Operating Funds - SECURED	\$2,000.00
<b>Total Leveraged Funds</b>	<b>\$27,100.00</b>