The people of Alakanuk, Alaska already know the problems their young people face.

Those problems have been well documented and studied, said Debbie Alstrom, a field research coordinator with the Center for Alaska Native Health Research who has spent most of her life in the small Southwestern Alaska community.

It is not well known how those young people live successful lives, and plenty do, Alstrom said. It's time to review their achievements because their stories could help others, she said. The University of Alaska Fairbanks, along with five other universities, will examine those success stories from Alakanuk and other circumpolar communities using a $1.094 million International Polar Year grant from the National Science Foundation.

"People know all the issues that need to be dealt with, but only know a few ways to help," Alstrom said. "They want to find more ways to deal with or fix an issue or problem."

The NSF project will take place over the next three years. James Allen and Gerald Mohatt, both UAF psychology professors with CANHR, will collaborate on the project with Olga Ulturgasheva of Cambridge University, Michael Kral of the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign and University of Toronto, and Lisa Wexler of University of Massachusetts Amherst. All have extensive experience working in indigenous communities and the NSF project will dovetail with their previous projects. Allen and Mohatt will work in Alakanuk. Kral will work in Igloolik, Nunavut. Wexler will work in Kotzebue, Alaska and Ulturgasheva will work in Topolinoye, Siberia. In addition, Kristine Nystad at Sami University College, along with Benedicte Ingstad at the University of Oslo, will work in Kautokeino, Norway.

The plan is to collect life histories of youths in the four circumpolar communities that are home to Alaska Inupiat and Yupik, Canadian Inuit and Siberian Eveny peoples. They will then compare the stories to one another.

That way, the knowledge of success is shared first among the circumpolar communities, Kral said, "which is more useful than an outsider approach."

The researchers will depend on community members as partners, not as research subjects. People like Alstrom, who is Yup'ik Eskimo, and others will guide the researchers.

Natar Ungalaq, an Inuit from Igloolik, is eager to be a part of the project.

"We need action," said Ungalaq, who was also the star in the film "Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner." "This is action. Let other people see successful young people."

Ulturgasheva is Eveny herself, from the community of Topolinoye.

"For a Native researcher like myself, it is a double responsibility to work with my Native community as the community expects and demands from me more than from outsiders who come to the community once in a while," she said. "I'll need to be responsive and accountable to people's requests and give them the opportunity to speak for themselves and voice their concerns."

Wexler has met with community leaders in Kotzebue, where she has lived for more than 10 years. The leaders already have plans to help youths and have a good understanding of how research works.
"This fits really well into the larger scope of what they are trying to create in the community and in the region," Wexler said.

The idea of looking for what indigenous people are doing right is emerging in research, said Allen.

"The history of resilience and healthy adaptation of indigenous people has not been adequately considered," he said, "while the impact of colonial and contemporary suffering has been extensively documented."

UAF will receive $396,806 of the grant, which will be managed by CANHR, part of UAF’s Institute of Arctic Biology. In March, youths from each community will attend a meeting at Cambridge University as part of their first collaboration.

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University of Alaska Fairbanks

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