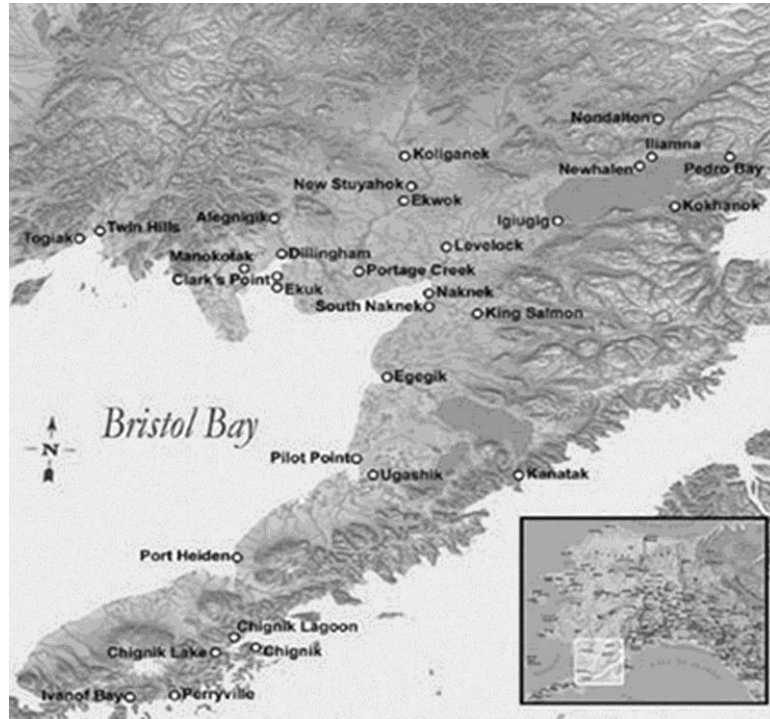


SAFE AND SISTR: EVERYONE WELCOME HERE

Safe and Fear Free Environment, Inc (SAFE), in Dillingham, AK, is one example of a program that goes the extra mile to be accessible to people with multiple trauma issues and multiple needs. SAFE is Bristol Bay's shelter and advocacy agency for domestic violence and sexual assault victims. Dillingham, a community of 2400 people, serves as a hub for as many as twenty-five surrounding villages and has a geographic service area approximately the size of Ohio.



Few roads connect Bristol Bay villages, so transportation is accomplished mostly by plane or boat. The nearest metropolitan city is Anchorage, 315 off-the-road miles northeast of Dillingham. Three air carriers provide jet transportation between Anchorage and Dillingham, while smaller planes provide transportation between villages and to and from Dillingham.

Isolation poses special challenges

SAFE's closest sister agencies are in Unalaska (Unalaskans Standing Against Family Violence) and Bethel (Tundra Womens' Coalition). Unalaska is at the beginning of the Aleutian chain and Bethel is northwest of Dillingham at the mouth of the Kuskokwim River. In between SAFE, USAFW and TWC is lots of land and water, where isolation can create additional barriers for people seeking to escape violence.

Breaking the barrier of isolation is paramount for people who experience domestic violence and sexual assault in rural Alaska and can be costly and logistically challenging. SAFE provides crisis line services, transportation, shelter and legal advocacy for the people the agency serves.

Domestic violence and sexual assault are common and overwhelming problems in Bristol Bay. In any given year, nearly 20 percent of adult female residents of the Bay receive services from SAFE. Another 10 percent will go through the police and courts without ever

contacting SAFE. However, domestic violence is substantially under-reported, and staff members believe it is conservative to estimate that three out of 10 adult women in Bristol Bay will be victims of domestic violence sometime this year. The average number of children in households of women who seek services from SAFE is three – most are under the age of 10.

Another challenge: Cultural barriers

Alaska Native women comprise less than 5 percent of the population, yet make up nearly 60 percent of reported sexual assault victims. Nearly one-third of the women in shelters in urban areas of the state are Alaskan Native women.

Cultural disruption is associated with increased violence against women among Alaskan Native groups, and Bristol Bay is no exception. Prior to Western intrusion, some Native groups were egalitarian, some matriarchal, and some patriarchal; however, status depended more on the individual's ability to contribute to the group instead of on gender. Violence against women was not the norm for any Alaskan Native group. Native Alaskans interacted through extended families, provided for their basic needs from the land and sea, educated through oral tradition, and focused on communal needs.

Throughout its 20-plus years of service to Bristol Bay, SAFE has identified major barriers to victims of violence attaining either short- or long-term safety. Western culture generally requires a lifestyle of nuclear families, wage earners, formalized education, and a focus on individual needs. Today, while many rural Alaskans still depend on subsistence, the cash system is necessary for most basic needs.

Television is available throughout the state, which has further undermined traditional Native values. Many Elders have lost their place of honor and respect. Being forced to reconcile Western culture with their own has led to high suicide rates, chronic alcoholism, and increased violence against women and children. SAFE's commitment to reduce these barriers led to the birth of the SISTR Program.

More challenges: Addressing multiple issues

The Safety in Sobriety Through Recovery Program (SISTR) came about when the local shelter director and the local treatment provider sat in a maqiq (*Yupik name for steam bath*) and pondered how to reduce barriers for the people they both serve in the remote Bristol Bay area of Alaska. The SISTR Program was designed to meet the needs of women and children over 12 years of age who are, or have been, served by SAFE, or who live in the Bristol Bay region and have been affected by violence, alcohol and/or other drug use and are seeking help.

Housed at SAFE, onsite substance abuse counselors provide outpatient services and provide access to other agencies as needed. Advocates at the shelter provide safety planning, shelter, advocacy and child-care for women to attend intensive outpatient (day) treatment at Jake's

Place, the Bristol Bay Area Health Corporation residential alcohol/drug program where the counselors also maintain an office and are part of the regular treatment team.

SISTR and SAFE can help with crisis intervention, emergency transportation, advocacy and support, legal advocacy, medical and court accompaniment, safe shelter, a 24-hour crisis line, information and referral, videos and reading materials. Most importantly advocates listen, offer support in a nonjudgmental manner and prioritize accommodating everyone they serve in an empowering, non-coercive, practical manner.

SISTR serves both single women and women who face barriers due to child-care responsibilities. Education on the combined impact of domestic violence, sexual assault and alcohol and other drug abuse is provided in a culturally relevant manner with a focus on safety, autonomy, freedom from fear, empowerment and justice.

Offering trauma-informed services

SAFE is committed to providing trauma-informed services rooted in the experience of survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault and as well as that of recovering women. Rules are kept to a minimum and advocates provide accommodation as needed.

SAFE has developed tools to reduce barriers for shelter residents and other people they serve who experience Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder and other behavioral health issues. Individuals experiencing cognitive disabilities have access to information in multiple formats. Pictures are used to communicate complex steps and information is provided in manageable chunks.

Among the excellent resources developed by SAFE are the videos “*The Heart of the Grizzly*” and “*The Woman and the Moon*.” These videos portray the experiences of survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence in rural Alaska.

Ongoing programs for women also include:

- ***Maintaining Our Mothers’ Sobriety (MOMS)***. Evening child care for parents in aftercare treatment or attending support groups.
- ***Ending Violence in Our Lives through Validation and Empowerment (EVOLVE)***. Services for women who have resorted to using violence in their lives or relationships.
- ***Thursday Night Support Group***. Dinner, Talking Circle and Maqiq (steam).

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