



## PHP National Partner Highlight – Alaska Community Action on Toxics



Pristine. Unpolluted. Natural. Many people think of the largely undeveloped state of Alaska in these terms, but toxic chemicals are threatening the ability of Alaskans to simply grow uncontaminated food. Industrial pollutants used in other places migrate on wind and ocean currents and end up in the arctic. Along with hazardous wastes from past and current military sites and local industrial pollutants, the contaminants are damaging the ecosystem so severely that the Arctic Indigenous peoples are among the most polluted people on Earth. Contaminates are then passed on to infants and are linked to a multitude of health disorders.

**Alaska Community Action on Toxics (ACAT)** is working to change the story for Alaskans today and for future generations. This environmental health and justice organization, established in 1997, works to empower communities to limit or eliminate their exposure to toxic substances and to protect and restore the ecosystems that sustain their livelihoods. They believe that “everyone has the right to clean air, clean water, and toxic-free food.”

The Presbyterian Hunger Program first partnered with ACAT in 2018 to support their work.

In the far north, ACAT’s Yarducopia program provides training, organic seedlings, and compost for volunteers who would like to learn and practice organic gardening techniques. Volunteers help build and maintain gardens, and at least 10 percent of the produce is donated to local food banks.



*Bike tour of Yarducopia gardens.  
Photos courtesy of ACAT*

In 2019, clients of a food pantry in Anchorage participated in training and helped build, maintain, and harvest fresh produce at the Spenard Community Garden. Each growing season the garden continues to provide fresh foods for many families. “Lasagna” gardens were also started in residential neighborhoods, and ACAT partnered with a children’s preschool to create a perennial garden and food forest. Besides continuing to establish neighborhood, school, and community gardens to increase food security, Yarducopia created a community composting and material exchange

site. Volunteers gather there to learn about composting, and they help build, turn, and amend composting materials for the community.

ACAT not only helps with growing fresh foods, but also focuses on identifying and eliminating the causes of the problems they are working to solve. They help conduct scientific research on public health issues and publish information on public health interventions and policies.

ACAT organized an Arctic Indigenous women's delegation to participate in the international Stockholm Convention on Persistent Pollutants Conference of the Parties in Geneva in 2019. Among other victories, the group was instrumental in achieving global bans on the industrial chemical PFOA and a DDT-related pesticide called dicofol. They continue to work with an expert committee to move three chemicals toward global elimination and to address microplastics pollution. Locally, they worked to achieve commitments from local hardware stores to stop selling toxic pesticides.

In another victory, ACAT achieved passage of an Anchorage ordinance that is one of the strongest laws in Alaska that bans toxic flame-retardant chemicals from children's products, furniture and mattresses. In the past few years, they have partnered with the department of health to offer training for at least 175 childcare providers on reducing exposure to toxic substances. Part of the project included facilitating exchanges of nap mats for new, safer ones for at least 30 childcare facilities.

The nap mat exchange was supported by the Healthy Babies Bright Futures' (HBBF) Bright Cities program, which ACAT helped the municipality of Anchorage to join in 2018. Also because of work in this partnership, Alaska became one of just 3 states that has taken infant rice cereal off the WIC list because of arsenic contamination.

And ACAT has worked to advance policies to protect drinking water and environmental and public health from harmful PFAS chemicals. They have engaged thousands of Alaskans in promoting policies to protect environmental health and justice at both local and international levels. In April 2021, ACAT's Environmental Health and Justice Program Director was appointed to the White House Environmental Justice Advisory Council.

In response to requests from Indigenous women for leadership training and networking opportunities, ACAT hosted a second statewide Indigenous Women and Girls Virtual Gathering and Leadership Training for 200 participants. The emphases were climate change, petrochemicals, and a call to action for a just transition. A network of informed and civically engaged women is growing. The board and staff of ACAT are Alaska Native-led and women-led, and they recognize the need for diversity, equity, and inclusion as they consider leadership positions.

The Presbyterian Hunger Program (PHP) is glad to partner with groups like ACAT who are working to bring about environmental justice and food security in their communities.

*Supported by One Great Hour of Sharing and gifts from congregations, presbyteries, and individuals, PHP works in partnership with organizations in the United States and around the world each year to help alleviate hunger and eliminate its causes. In places where hunger, poverty and injustice have impacted communities, we can continue to lift our voices and work together to make a difference.*

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