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# SOUTHERN KENAI PENINSULA RESILIENCE COALITION

## Theory of Change

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# WHAT IS A THEORY OF CHANGE?

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A theory of change (ToC) is the story of how we think change happens as a result of our actions. For the Southern Kenai Peninsula Resilience Coalition (SKPRC), this is a cohesive story (or theory) of how our coalition makes change with and for young people through positive adult relationships. A ToC is a tool to help describe a need to be addressed, the changes to be made (outcomes), and the things that will happen to achieve those changes (activities). This high-level framework helps an organization focus its decision-making and prioritize its resources while staying focused on its long-term impact. Our Theory of Change process utilized backward mapping to clarify why and how we think change happens, building from our own assumptions, beliefs, anecdotes, as well as science-backed evidence.

Participating in a Theory of Change process makes thinking more visible, which in turn helps align efforts. A theory of change is ideally built as part of initial program planning but is also helpful for programs that are more established. By creating a Theory of Change within a more established effort, partners in the work are able to pause to assess their own efforts, determine effectiveness, and consider adjustments that might better align activities with desired outcomes. Moreover, theories of change provide a solid foundation upon which to build measurement and evaluation approaches.

A Theory of Change is well suited for programs that are complex, influenced by multiple systems or partners, and offer a more fluid approach to describing program theory than a logic model. Yet, the SKPRC's Logic Model, developed in 2021 provided the foundation for this Theory of Change effort.

## SITUATION ANALYSIS<sup>1</sup>

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The Southern Kenai Peninsula Resilience Coalition (SKPRC) has a vision that “Communities on the Southern Kenai Peninsula cultivate healthy relationships and resilient families, free from violence and substance misuse.” In order to achieve this vision, the SKPRC focus has become: “to lift up our youth with positive adult connections.” Utilizing current evidence-based literature and practice, the SKPRC has chosen two protective factors to guide the Coalition toward its long-term outcome: (1) positive connection to other adults and (2) engaging in quality afterschool programs.

Research on shared risk and protective factors in Alaska has been driven by prevention expert Becky Judd. Extensive research demonstrates a strong association between community conditions, relationships, personal characteristics, and experiences with harmful behaviors in adolescents (Judd 2024). The research literature refers to these shared influences as Risk and Protective Factors. These factors have a powerful influence across several harmful adolescent behaviors, including substance misuse; depression and suicidal behavior; violence; and unsafe sexual activity.

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<sup>1</sup>The shared risk and protective factors section draws from the work of Becky Judd, summarized in a one page brief submitted to the SKPC in February 2024. Out-of-School-Time best practices were developed by the Alaska Afterschool Network and presented to the SKPRC in January 2024.

Risk and protective factors are categorized by “sectors” according to the Social Ecology model (Figure 1). While the individual is at the heart of this model, the factors in the other sectors greatly influence the attitudes and behaviors of youth. Public Health and prevention-science research suggest the most effective way to prevent harmful behaviors among adolescents and increase their positive development is through focusing on the shared influences (factors) at each level of the social ecology. Within the Social Ecology Model, supportive trusted adults (other than parents) and quality after-school programs and activities are both identified as protective factors at the community level. It is at this level that the SKPRC has identified as their sphere of influence.

A multi-year analysis of the Alaska Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) confirmed the relevance of national research to Alaska, across multiple adolescent health areas. In his paper, Utermohle (2021), found:

- Protective factors are correlated with lower prevalence across most adolescent problem behaviors measured by YRBS;
- There is an additive and synergistic effect - problem behavior is reduced as the number of protective factors increases (Judd 2024).

The Alaska Afterschool Network draws on the research around risk and protective factors to inform a set of best practices for out-of-school-time (OST) settings in the state. The Alaska Afterschool has identified the importance of both individuals (e.g., adults who work with youth) and environment (e.g., the setting in which programming takes place) in positive youth development. Youth workers must be: knowledgeable of best practices (positive youth development, trauma-informed, culturally responsive), must engage in reflective practices, and be committed to ongoing learning. High-quality OST environments must be safe, welcoming, and respectful; offer a supportive environment that is trauma-informed and sensitive and focused on positive youth development; provide structured activities that are skills-based and appropriate (developmentally as well as over an appropriate amount of time); and implement programs committed to continuous quality improvement.

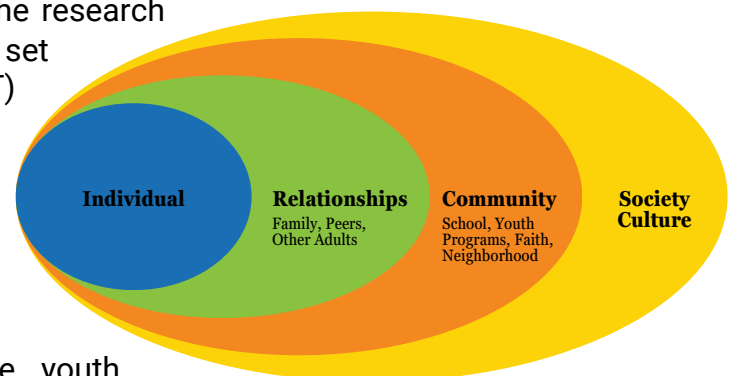


Figure 1: Social Ecology Model

## **LONG TERM OUTCOME**

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Previous work on the SKPRC’s Logic Model identified the Long-Term Outcome (LTO) as: “Increased strong connection between youth and adults within high quality out-of-school-time (OST) programs in Homer.”



This LTO was modified prior to the ToC workshop to reflect two distinctions: out of school time (including after school hours, evenings, weekends, summers, holiday breaks) is where the efforts for youth-adult connection would happen, and in Homer (as opposed to the whole of the Southern Kenai Peninsula). These modifications clarified and narrowed the scope of the Long-Term Outcome.

## **THEORY OF CHANGE WORKSHOP**

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The Southern Kenai Peninsula Resilience Coalition held a one-day workshop on March 2, 2024 to produce the Theory of Change. Nine participants joined the eight-hour session, representing the Resilience Coalition Leadership Team, Workgroup Leads, Youth Consultants, and a Coalition Coordinator. The session was co-facilitated by two external consultants. During the workshop participants were asked to reflect, share, and develop consensus around several contextual questions. These questions helped to set the foundation for moving into backwards mapping. Below are the identified beneficiaries, funding, resources, and partners recorded during the workshop.

### **Beneficiaries: Pre-kindergarten - 12th grade & Parents**

#### **Funding**

Grants  
In-kind  
Agency-specific funding  
Small project-based grants/sponsorships

#### **Resources**

Schools  
Churches  
Nonprofits (education, health, activities, services, other)  
Families (historical network: who you know / ability to form connections, network)  
City / government  
Private businesses  
Internet  
Environmental

#### **Partners**

Kenai Peninsula Borough School District	Kenai Peninsula Youth Court
Sprout Family Services	Islands and Oceans Visitors Center
South Peninsula Hospital	Homer Foundation / scholarships
Center for Alaskan Coastal Studies	Kachemak Bay Campus, UAA
Department of Juvenile Justice	Rotary Club
Childcare Providers	Pier One Theatre
City Parks and Recreation	Bunnell Street Arts Gallery
Hockey/sports	Homer Public Library
Independent Living Center	Homer Family Theater
South Peninsula Behavioral Health Services	Private Outdoors Companies
Haven House	Girls on the Run
Kachemak Bay Family Planning Clinic	SPARC
Junior Nordic/ Kachemak Nordic Ski Club	CAC Youth Programs
Seldovia Village Tribe	

## **HYPOTHESIS**

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The SKPRC's Theory of Change is based on the logic that change is dynamic and dependent on mutually reinforcing preconditions. The SKPRC believes that several pathways are crucial for the coalition to be effective to reaching its goal. They are: equitable access, family engagement, youth-focused programs, OST adults and programs, and coordinated systems in place.

## **ASSUMPTIONS**

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An assumption is defined as conditions or resources that are needed for the success of a program that already exist and will not be problematic to maintain. The SKPRC assumes that, because the Coalition already exists, it will continue to work towards sustainability. Therefore, Coalition Sustainability does not appear as a causal pathway in the Theory of Change.

## **THEORY OF CHANGE DIAGRAM AND BELIEFS**

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A Theory of Change is a visual representation of how we think change occurs. In the diagram below, five causal pathways were identified, leading to the identified Long-Term Outcome: "Increased strong connection between youth and adults in high-quality out-of-school time in Homer". These causal pathways are: Equitable Access, OST Essential Adults & Programs, Youth-focused programs, Systems, and Family Engagement. Each causal pathway has an associated set of preconditions. Preconditions are those things that must exist in order for the next outcome in the pathway to be achieved. The identified preconditions represent the beliefs that workshop participants hold about how change will occur that leads to stronger connections between youth and adults in OST programs in Homer.

The SKPRC believes that because significant barriers exist in the form of equitable access, this is a causal pathway that is a precondition to achieving the Long-Term Outcome. Current barriers are identified in the green box below the Equitable Access causal pathway and include: Family Awareness and Engagement; Equipment and Supplies; Registration and Fees; Transportation; Being Responsible for Siblings/Childcare/ Parentification; Qualification for Support. When families are aware of resources, they are better able to access them and overcome barriers/obstacles to accessing high-quality out-of-school-time programming where strong youth-adult connections can be made.

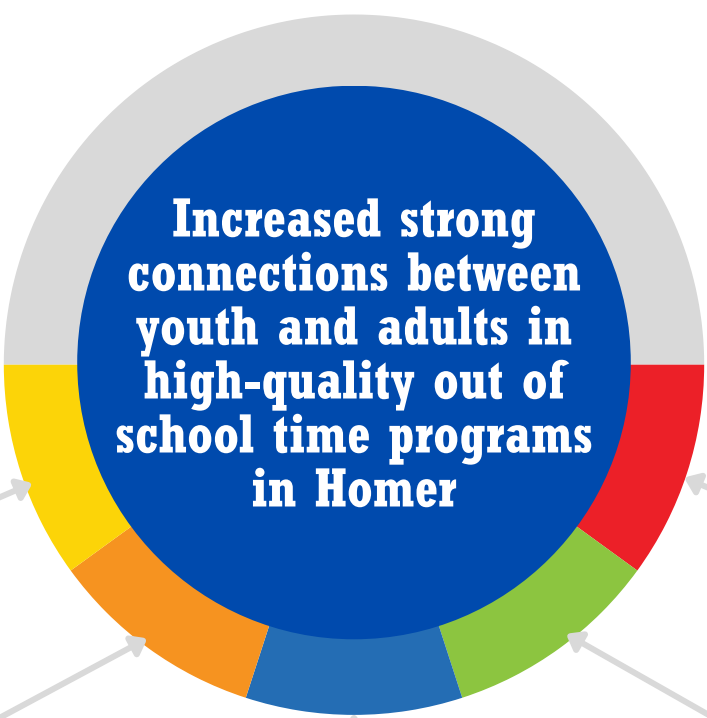
Drawing on the best practices of the Alaska Afterschool Network, the OST Essential Adults and Programs pathway is centered on the two pillars of high-quality OST programming: individuals and environments. When individual adults within OST programs are aware of best practices and can learn about them, then they can implement and practice behaviors that support youth and demonstrate: true belief in youth as co-leaders, non-judgement, resource-providing, and listening to develop meaningful relationships.

Additionally, when there is a clear definition of what “high-quality” means, there is a framework from which to learn and implement within OST programming. While an additional causal pathway was considered, the features and preconditions of that potential pathway are linked to those preconditions identified in the OST Essential Adults and Programs pathway, particularly the “Programs” component. The features that participants named, and that can be merged with the identified pathway are: is it safe (everyone trusts space, people, staff); space allows youth needs to be acknowledged and met; youth-informed programming (two-way communication); the environment supports a culture of vulnerability and acceptance for everyone; and inclusive for all.

When programs are youth-focused, there is a direct link to increased positive connections between youth and adults within OST programming. Workshop participants identified two strands of the Youth-Focused causal pathway. First, there is a belief that youth must first have exposure to a variety of activities to determine what their own interests are. Only then can they determine where they want to become engaged and spend their time. When youth have a positive experience at an OST program with a reliable adult they have something against which they can define, determine, and pursue other positive adult relationships. In some cases, the positive adult is what sparks youth's interest in an activity. In other cases, a young person may be drawn to an activity and develop a positive relationship with the adult program provider. In either scenario, the SKPRC believes that having at least one experience with a positive adult within an OST program can help increase the ability to build strong connections between youth and adults in Homer. Further, in the second strand within the pathway, the SKPRC believes that youth awareness of resources bolsters their ability to recognize that they can seek help/resources. This increases young people's ability to self-advocate and know what to look for when they are looking for a positive connection, help, and support. When youth are aware of why positive adult connections are important and when they have a model or an experience with reliable adults, they are better able to forge strong connections with positive adults in out-of-school-time programs.

Similarly, when families are aware of what opportunities are available in Homer for youth, they are more likely to support youth attendance and engagement at OST programs. Not only are families a named beneficiary of SKPRC efforts, but they can also act as enablers or inhibitors when it comes to youth programming. For the SKPRC, it will be important to understand how and why youth and families access OST time programs.

Finally, supportive systems are critical to the success of the Long-Term Outcome. Workshop participants identified that in order to increase strong connections between youth and adults in out-of-school time programs in Homer that there need to be enough well-paid, well-trained and well-staffed high quality OSTs to meet the need. Additionally, organizations must report that they have the capacity to make strong connections with youth.



**Equitable Access**

- Ability to overcome obstacles (all)
- Organization awareness of needs / resources
- Access to resources
- Awareness of available resources

**Barriers:** Family Awareness and Engagement; Equipment and Supplies; Registration and Fees; Transportation; Being Responsible for Siblings/childcare/Parentification; Qualification for support

**OST Essential Adults & Programs**

- | Individual Providers   | OST & Program Culture                             |
|--|---|
| Providing/demonstrating true belief in youth as co-leaders, non-judgemental, resource-providing, listening to develop meaningful relationships | Integrate OST high-quality features into programs |
| Be informed / learn  | Raise awareness of high quality OST               |
| Be aware   | Define "high quality" OST                         |

**Youth-Focused**

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| Youth have experience with reliable adults (home, OST programs) | Youth have positive experiences at an OST program with a reliable adult |
| Youth are aware of why positive adult connections are important | Youth are engaged and interested in the OST (match)                     |
| Youth recognize they can seek help/resources                    | Youth have exposure to a variety of activities/interests                |
| Youth are aware of resources / help                             |   |

**Systems**

- There are enough well paid, well trained and well staffed high quality OSTs to meet need
- Organizations report that they have capacity to make strong connections with youth

**Family Engagement**

- Families are aware of community youth programming (informed)
- Identify how and why youth / families access OST programs

Assumptions: Coalition Sustainability



## INTERVENTIONS

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Several interventions were named or noted during the Theory of Change workshop. They were as follows:

- Connecting OST programs with resources
- Celebrate and promote high-quality OSTs that are working
- Youth organizations collaborate and are educated on offerings
- OST messaging
- Training in Schools
- Information for families and youth (RC)
- The SKPRC provides model messaging for what “high quality” looks like and strong connections

## NEXT STEPS

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The Theory of Change workshop only focused on determining beneficiaries, inputs (resources, partners, funding), casual pathways and preconditions. The next step for the SKPRC is to translate the Theory of Change into Action Plans that can be used in workgroups to determine and refine SKPRC strategies, outputs, outcomes, and measures. Researchers at Encompass Evaluation<sup>2</sup> identified five “tests” to consider how to move forward with determining strategy. These tests are:

- **DESIRABILITY:** If we achieved all outcomes, would we want this new reality?
- **REALISM:** How likely are we to achieve the outcome we are striving for?
- **EASE:** How hard is it to achieve each of these outcomes?
- **CAPACITY:** Do we have capabilities to undertake this work? Partners?
- **STRATEGY:** Which of these outcomes moves us closer to our goal? Faster to our goal?

In the coming weeks and months, it will be important for SKPRC members to convene to solidify strategies that support identified causal pathways leading to the Long Term Outcome of “Increased strong connections between youth and adults in high-quality out of school time programs in Homer.”

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<sup>2</sup>Catsambas, T. T., and L. M. Franco. 2019. Mapping Outcomes: Embedding evaluation in the life of an organization for improved social change programming. Rockville, MD: EnCompass LLC.

# **APPENDIX A - THEORY OF CHANGE GLOSSARY**

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## **Assumption**

Conditions or resources that are needed for the success of a program that already exist and will not be problematic to maintain. Assumptions are crucial because if they are incorrect they can completely alter how a program works.

## **Backward Mapping**

The process of \*beginning\* with a long-term goal and working “backward” toward the earliest changes that need to occur. This is the opposite of how we usually think about planning because it starts with asking “what preconditions must exist for the long-term outcome to be reached?” rather than starting with the question: “What can we do to bring the outcome about”?

## **Beliefs**

An acceptance that something is true or that something exists. Our personal beliefs and worldviews inform the assumptions underpinning the paradigms we uphold about how change happens and can best be achieved.

## **Intervention**

The things a program will undertake to bring about outcomes. For example, an intervention might be: “hold literacy classes” and the various activities needed to make that happen would be things like identifying space and teachers, choosing a curriculum, screening students, etc.

## **Long-Term Outcome**

The goal you want to reach; the purpose of your program. For example, increased strong connections between youth and adults in Homer. All other outcomes in the framework are preconditions to this outcome.

## **Out of School Time (OST) Programs**

Out of School Time programs are supervised programs that young people regularly attend when school is not in session. This can include before and afterschool programs, evenings, weekends, holidays, and summer.

## **Outcome**

An outcome is a condition that does not currently exist that must be in place for an initiative to work. An outcome may represent a change in a group of people, organizations, or places. Outcomes are the building blocks of your Theory of Change. Except for the long-term outcome, all outcomes on your change framework are also preconditions which are necessary for other outcomes.

## **Pathway**

The sequence of outcomes that must occur in order to reach a long-term goal. Most initiatives have multiple pathways that lead to the long-term goal.

## **Precondition**

All outcomes, except the long-term outcome, are also preconditions. They are called preconditions because they are conditions that must exist in order for the next outcome in the pathway to be achieved. You can think of them as precursors because they must be achieved before the next outcome in the pathway can be accomplished.

## **Theory of Change**

A theory of change defines all building blocks required to bring about a given long-term goal. This set of connected building blocks – interchangeably referred to as outcomes and preconditions – is depicted on a map known as a pathway of change/change framework, which is a graphic representation of the change process.



# APPENDIX B - WORKSHOP PHOTOS

