



ANNUAL REPORT 2023

The Alaska Public Interest Research Group



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Land Acknowledgement

AKPIRG works to ensure the rights of people who are often sidelined, and to create healthy and thriving communities. Our work is done with the understanding that corporations should not have undue influence in our systems of government, especially as corporations are recent constructs and many different types of government have existed on this land for tens of thousands of years. Alaska is an Indigenous place, comprising 227 federally recognized Tribes, and our work takes place on unceded sovereign land. This fact informs our work and our lives. AKPIRG staff and board live on and are stewards of Sugpiaq, Dena'ina, Auk Kwáan, Taku Kwáan, Lower Tanana Dene, Gwichyaa Zhee Gwich'in, Denaakk'e, and Yup'ik lands and nations.

Letter from the Executive Director



When I started at AKPIRG five years ago, part-time and as a staff of one, I spent a lot of time investing in the belief that this organization would become a credible defense against government corruption, that we could help change the laws and peoples' lives for day-to-day pocketbook issues, and that, through this work, we could show that a better world was possible.

Now, that dream feels like an incredible reality, thanks to the dedication of our passionate and talented staff.

From working to change the laws on predatory loans while also raising money to pay off community members' loans with a 400%+ interest rate, to shaping the vision of internet access locally and nationally, to taking on corrupt actors in our state and local government, to starting bi-lingual citizenship classes, and far more, our staff has done so much in 2023 that it feels almost overwhelming.

Throughout the year, we solidified AKPIRG's role as a trusted resource on policy issues. Members of the press sought our experts for commentary on statewide advocacy issues, and our staff contributed to several national reports, including the [Rural Policy Action Report](#) and [Visions of Digital Equity](#). In April, our presence in the Alaska State Legislature expanded through our inaugural Legislative Fly-In, where we engaged with numerous state lawmakers, advocating for sensible policies and serving as trusted experts on various issues.

One incredible thing about a passionate staff and board is how nimble they are. Our energy team immediately supported the village of Aniak after their electric bills increased by 400% overnight, ultimately reversing the price increase for residents. Internally, our board and staff have worked hard to be an organization that reflects its values through and through. This spring, we added retirement benefits for staff. This summer, we piloted a four-day workweek. This fall, we focused on a collaborative and transparent budgeting process across all programs.

Today, AKPIRG has 22 staff members, all dedicated to their work's focus, and this year, we added five new full-time staff members. We proudly welcome Mel Izard, Development Lead; Mercedes Arcineiga, Outreach Lead; Rochelle Adams, Language Access Director; Austin Todd, Broadband Fellow; and Natalie Kiley-Bergen, Energy Lead, to the AKPIRG team.

While our team continues to grow, we have an opportunity to reflect on our past and where AKPIRG has been. This summer, we acquired our archives from the University of Alaska, dating back to our founding in 1974. We have hired an awesome archivist and are working to digitize our history and learn a lot of it along the way. So far, what we've discovered has reaffirmed that our work continues to honor the legacy of those who have come before us and that our values have been consistent since our founding. As AKPIRG continues to grow and change at an accelerating pace, our commitment to working in the public interest is steadfast.

Sincerely,



Veri di Suvero
Executive Director

P.S. 2024 marks AKPIRG's 50th Anniversary! You will be hearing a lot more from us, about how AKPIRG has played a significant role in shaping this state over the years, about where we are now, and how we are building toward where we need to go. We are planning events across the state and are so excited to grow our work together in the coming years.



Who We Are

Our Mission:

Founded in 1974, AKPIRG is a non-profit, non-partisan, citizen-oriented statewide membership organization. AKPIRG researches, educates, and advocates on behalf of consumers and the public interest. AKPIRG advances the public interest by providing individuals with the opportunity and information to participate equally in and be treated equally by our economic, social, and political systems.

Our Vision:

We are working towards a world of self-determined, thriving communities governed by people, not corporations. AKPIRG removes structural challenges that improve the material conditions impacting people across economic development, climate, and democracy, working towards innovative policies and systems that seek and achieve reform. AKPIRG works on a systems level for systemic change, being responsive and accountable to communities.

Our Core Values:

- Justice
- Accountability
- Community
- Trust

We work to ensure:

- Transparent and accountable government systems
- Robust language accessibility
- Affordable and reliable phone and internet access for all
- Compassionate, people-centered economic policy
- An affordable, reliable, and renewable energy future

Our Staff



Veri di Suvero
(they/them)
Executive Director



Robin O'Donoghue
(he/him)
Special Projects Lead



Camilla Hussein-Scott
(she/her)
Operations Manager



Mel Izard
(they/them)
Development Lead



Mercedes Arciniega
(she/her)
Outreach Lead



Bridget Shaughnessy Smith
(she/her)
Communications Lead



Rochelle Adams
(she/her)
Language Access Director



Natalie Kiley-Bergen
(she/her)
Energy Lead



Graham Downey
(he/him)
Economic Justice Lead



Brittany Woods-Orrison
(she/her)
Broadband Specialist



Andrée McLeod
(she/her)
Good Government Director



Ben Boettger
(he/him)
Energy Outreach Specialist



Erin Willahan
(she/her)
Language Access Coordinator



Alyssa Sappenfield
(she/they)
Energy Analyst



Erin Baldwin Day
(she/her)
Lead, Mutual Aid Network of Anchorage



Phil Wight
(he/they)
Policy Analyst



Austin Todd
(they/he)
Broadband Fellow



Brian Kassof
(he/him)
Editor, Alaska Energy Transparency Project



Annauk Olin
(she/her)
Language Access Team

Our Board



Lois Epstein
(she/her)
Chair



Will Kronick
(he/him)
Vice Chair



Ron Meehan
(he/him)
Secretary



Ira Slomski-Pritz
(they/them)
Treasurer



Sydney Scout
(she/her)



Clay Venetis
(he/him)



Nelta Edwards
(she/her)



Steve Koteff
(he/him)

2023 By the Numbers

 **622**

petition signatures gathered

 **21**

loans paid off for Alaskans

 **8**

published op-eds

 **5**

new full-time staff

 **76**

media hits

 **22**

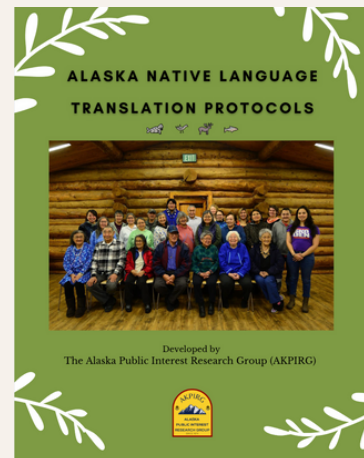
public comments & testimonies

Program Highlights

Language Access

The effort to ensure that all languages are valued and made integral to work done around the state is ongoing, championed by the AKPIRG Language Access Team. This year, our long time consultant and partner Rochelle Adams joined AKPIRG as Language Access Director, amplifying language programs and enhancing prioritization of language access in our civic engagement and consumer advocacy programs. Under her leadership, a deeper integration of the decolonization framework was prioritized organization-wide. AKPIRG takes pride in fostering the intersectionality between language access and statewide advocacy.

A key accomplishment this year was the finalization and distribution of the [AKPIRG Language Access Protocols](#). These Protocols provide best practices for language translation services, emphasizing equitable relationships between language experts and partners. AKPIRG aspires to promote language learning, education, curriculum creation, funding opportunities, and overall support for language work through these protocols.



In response to [FEMA's transmission of unintelligible and insensitive translations](#) to communities affected by Typhoon Merbok, our Language Access Team addressed the incident and shared the Protocols with FEMA to ensure appropriate translations in the future, particularly when communicating essential safety information during crises.

Simultaneously, the team has been working to uplift Alaska Native language work being done around the state by the AKPIRG Language Panelists. In October, we

were thrilled to debut our AKPIRG Language Champion series on social media, highlighting the stories of our Panelists and celebrating their efforts to maintain Alaska Native language and culture in their communities. Learn more about our Language Panelists and view our Language Champion Hall of Fame [here](#).

In 2023, AKPIRG renewed its Get Out The Vote (GOTV) project in Kodiak. Originally initiated in 2022 with the support of [Asian Americans Advancing Justice](#), the project expanded this year to focus on pathways to citizenship for the FilAm community on the island. The team launched a citizenship test class at Kodiak College, conducted in both English and Tagalog, with over 20 students participating. The class, held from August to November, included a visit from United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), who conducted naturalization interviews, collected biometrics, and held two public seminars on the citizenship application process. The team is pushing for increased USCIS support in Kodiak, and has gained backing from Senators Lisa Murkowski and Dan Sullivan.



Citizenship test students attend lessons at Kodiak College.

Concurrently, the Kodiak team conducted a robust door-knocking campaign to Get Out The Vote for the local municipal and borough elections in October, discussing the availability of language support at the polls with voters, and distributing voter information in both English and Tagalog. We are so proud to work with this incredible team in Kodiak, and we look forward to developing both the citizenship class and the GOTV work during the 2024 election cycle.

Broadband Access

In Alaska, securing basic phone and internet coverage poses significant challenges, due to extreme costs, unreliable service in rural areas, and a lack of digital literacy training. At AKPIRG, our focus is on ensuring affordable, reliable, and equitable broadband for all Alaskans.

This year marked a substantial expansion of our broadband advocacy efforts at the state, federal, and international levels. Our Broadband Specialist, Brittany Woods-Orrison, played a pivotal role in various coalitions and committees, advocating for digital equity in underserved communities. Her representation of the rural Alaskan and Alaska Native perspective on digital equity has gained international recognition.

In April, we mobilized swiftly upon learning about the potential sunset of the Alaska Universal Service Fund (AUSF) in June at the direction of the Regulatory Commission of Alaska (RCA). A vital subsidy for telecommunications infrastructure deployment in rural Alaska, the AUSF ensures accessibility to essential services for all Alaskans. Recognizing the threat of doubled or tripled phone bills in rural areas, AKPIRG and [Native Movement](#) organized a robust response, generating over 100 public comments to the RCA. In response to the public outcry and the perceived threat to safety and welfare, the RCA implemented emergency regulations to sustain the fund, preserving access to crucial telecommunications services.



Attendees of the 2023 Indigenous Connectivity Summit, photo by Phil Steinhauer-Mozejko (connecthumanity.fund).

In May, Brittany played a key role in the success of the [2023 Indigenous Connectivity Summit \(ICS\)](#), a gathering of indigenous digital equity advocates from America and Canada held in Alaska this year. The summit focused on overcoming challenges to broadband deployment and featured discussions about advancing digital equity globally. As a local representative and consultant for this international convening of indigenous leadership, Brittany contributed significantly to its coordination. Find the calls to action from this year's summit [here](#).

Brittany also served as a Community Contributor to "[Visions of Digital Equity](#)," a guide published by the [Benton Institute](#) in August to aid state offices and advocates in formulating digital equity plans. With all 50 states in the process of crafting such plans, Brittany's input ensures Alaskan experiences are heard nationally. Read Brittany's Community Contributor Essay, "What Digital Equity Means for Rural Alaska," [here](#).

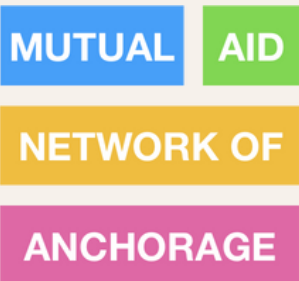
The AKPIRG Broadband Team grew this fall as we added Austin Todd, Broadband Fellow with the [Alaska Fellows Program](#), to the fold. A recent graduate of Yale University, Austin has been networking with leaders in the digital equity space since joining the team in September, and working to uplift various broadband projects across the state. We are so excited to see our capacity to advocate for self-determined, affordable, and accessible broadband in Alaska expand with Austin's support, and we look forward to continuing to expand this work in 2024.



Broadband Fellow Austin Todd tabling at the BIA Providers Conference.

Economic Justice

For almost 50 years, AKPIRG has been Alaska's non-profit consumer advocacy organization. While much of this advocacy has historically centered around state policies and regulations, in 2023 we were able to extend our impact on both the micro and macro scale – from providing direct aid to our neighbors, to cultivating relationships with federal lawmakers and agencies in Washington D.C.



We kicked off 2023 with the Payday Jubilee, a campaign to combat predatory lending and end the cycle of debt by paying off the payday loans of our neighbors. The average payday loan in Alaska is \$440 with a staggering 421% annual percentage interest rate (APR). The high cost of these short-term loans leaves many families trapped in a cycle of chronic debt & poverty. In order to provide direct relief to families suffering from this predatory debt entrapment, we partnered with the [Mutual Aid Network of Anchorage \(MANA\)](#) to pay off these loans, settling 21 loans this year. Having seen the direct impacts of predatory lending on Alaskans through the

Payday Jubilee, we were encouraged by the introduction of [HB 145](#), Rep. Stanley Wright's bill, which proposes a 36% interest rate cap for payday loans. As we approach the 2024 legislative session, our focus remains on lobbying for the passage of this bill to alleviate the burden on Alaskan families.



AKPIRG Staff at the Capitol in Washington D.C.



AKPIRG Staff at the Alaska State Capitol in Juneau.

On the federal level, our Economic Justice team raised concerns about the proposed mega-merger of grocery giants Kroger and Albertsons. The merging of these two grocery chains threatens the monopolization of groceries in Alaska. Our 2022 [petition](#) calling on our lawmakers in Washington to oppose the merger gained over 400 signatures, and so in 2023, joined by union allies concerned about the threat of job loss, we brought the petition to the offices of Rep. Peltola, Sen. Murkowski, and Sen. Sullivan. This joint effort convinced the entire Alaska Congressional Delegation to raise significant concerns about the Kroger-Albertsons Merger, and the Alaska Senate Majority soon followed with a resolution in opposition. This bipartisan opposition will have a significant effect in allowing the Federal Trade Commission to stop the merger. We are grateful to all those who signed on and have voiced their concerns about this issue.

On the municipal level, AKPIRG expanded its focus to address Anchorage's housing issues. This fall, Economic Justice Lead Graham Downey initiated the Anchorage Housing Club, an independent group of Anchorage citizens who advocate for municipal code and policy reforms. The club's newsletter, [The Blueprint](#), covers all things housing and transportation in Anchorage, simplifying these complex issues for non-experts interested in making a positive impact in their communities. As a fiscal sponsor, AKPIRG eagerly anticipates the club's advocacy shaping positive changes in the coming years.

Good Government

Since our founding, one of the core parts of AKPIRG's work has always been government transparency and accountability. This year was no different, as our Good Government staff worked hard to monitor the Alaska Legislature, the Governor's office and administration, the Alaska Personnel Board, the Alaska Public Offices Commission, and more. Watch-dogging these systems of power is critical to knowing how and why big decisions are made and keeps AKPIRG positioned to call out government agencies when they do not follow the law.



Good Government Director Andréa McLeod attends meetings at APOC.

In an era where traditional journalism is under-resourced and misinformation spreads freely on social media, our Good Government work is more important now than ever before. AKPIRG's vigilance in scrutinizing power structures, holding agencies accountable, and exposing corrupt practices serves as a vital defense against potential misuse of power. As technology transforms the information landscape, our dedication to fostering transparency remains pivotal in promoting a well-informed citizenry and safeguarding the principles of democracy. AKPIRG's Good Government work is not just a response to current challenges but a proactive effort to fortify the foundations of a resilient and accountable democratic society.

A significant focus this year involved [exposing corrupt modifications](#) to the Alaska Executive Branch Ethics Act by the Governor and Attorney General. The changes made provide the Governor, Lieutenant Governor, and Attorney General free legal representation on the state's dime in the instance of an ethics complaint or ethics violation filed against them with the Alaska Personnel Board. Our Good Government team worked to raise awareness of the issue and successfully built a strong public record of over [120 public comments](#) opposing the policy change. While the changes have unfortunately become law, the robust public record we've established serves as a foundation for future endeavors, and our commitment to addressing this issue persists.

Empowering citizens to expose corruption was a key focus of our Good Government work this year. Over our history and increasingly in recent years, AKPIRG has utilized [Alaska Public Records Act \(APRA\)](#) to expose corrupt practices within various state offices. This year, we began developing an online library, scheduled to launch in 2024, housing information uncovered through APRA requests for public access. To further encourage public participation, we introduced a [Corruption Tipline](#) in 2022 – a platform for Alaskans to report local and state government misconduct. The Tipline saw increased usage this year, underscoring that we are most effective in ensuring ethical governance when we work together to uphold our laws.



AKPIRG staff met with dozens of state legislators this year, including Rep. Andi Story and Sen. Bill Wielechowski.

As we continue to navigate an evolving political landscape, AKPIRG remains steadfast in its dedication to strengthening governmental transparency and accountability for the betterment of our community and the state of Alaska.

Energy Democracy

As Alaska's sole non-profit consumer advocacy organization, AKPIRG is devoted to cultivating an affordable, reliable, and renewable energy future for the state. Functioning as a consumer representative on the [Railbelt Reliability Council \(RRC\)](#), AKPIRG actively engages in RRC's Finance, Infrastructure, and Public Involvement Committees. Amid bureaucratic challenges and corporate influence, AKPIRG steadfastly champions heightened accountability and transparency in the energy sector. AKPIRG is committed to fostering grassroots involvement in major energy decisions in communities both on the Railbelt and off-grid.



Advocates call for greater transparency at the No Secrets, No Spills Rally outside of Boney Courthouse in Anchorage. Photo by Tanner Johnson.

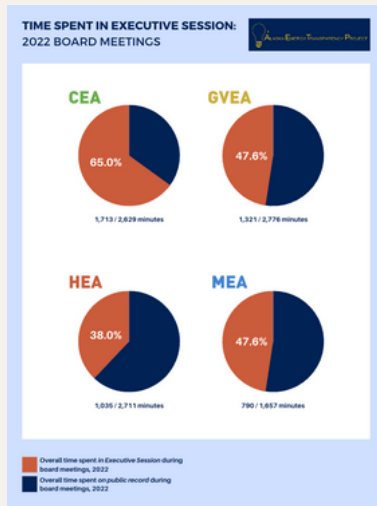
In June of 2023, AKPIRG supported the City of Valdez in a case against the Regulatory Commission of Alaska (RCA) over BP's secret sale of its oil assets to Hilcorp in 2019. Despite Hilcorp's questionable environmental record and numerous safety violations, the RCA permitted the acquisition without requiring public disclosure of Hilcorp's financial information. Partnering with the [Fairbanks Climate Action Coalition \(FCAC\)](#), AKPIRG orchestrated a successful [No Secrets, No Spills Rally](#) with a [crowd of 50](#) outside Anchorage's Boney Courthouse and a sit-in of [more than 100 spectators](#) during the Alaska Supreme Court oral arguments. This unprecedented public action was acknowledged and appreciated by a Justice during the hearing. With the verdict pending, expected next year, AKPIRG continues its vigilant pursuit of transparency and accountability in Alaska's energy landscape.



AKPIRG Energy Analyst Alyssa Sappenfield & Language Access Director Rochelle Adams speak to the crowd outside of Boney Courthouse. Photos by Tanner Johnson.

Faced with challenges to energy affordability, especially in off-Railbelt communities, AKPIRG found itself defending consumers across the state. Instances such as the [quadrupling of electricity bills in Aniak](#) and [unprecedented rate hikes in Southeast Alaska](#) prompted swift action from AKPIRG's Energy Team, who fervently advocated for reasonable rates for the public in several news outlets, and even traveled to Aniak with a day's notice to negotiate the reversal of the unjust rate increase.

Amidst a surge in regulatory capture, AKPIRG recognizes the urgency of empowering Alaskans to scrutinize their energy systems with heightened transparency. Sponsored by AKPIRG, the [Alaska Energy Transparency Project \(AETP\)](#)



serves as an independent publication to inform Alaskan electric cooperative member-owners about critical issues and decisions shaping the state's energy future. This spring, AETP released the first part of their [Electric Cooperative Transparency Scorecard](#), covering the transparency of electric co-op board meetings. The second part, a review of the accessibility of co-op websites and election processes, is slated for release in 2024.

In 2023, the Alaska State Legislature introduced multiple energy-related bills, among them [SB 152](#). Sponsored by Senator Bill Wielechowski, this legislation aims to enable Community Solar by law, allowing households in a community to share use of solar panels, reducing electricity bills and carbon footprints. Facilitating a just transition to renewable energy while reducing cost for consumers, this bill's introduction was a major focus for our Energy Team this year, and its passage will be a focus for our 2024 lobbying efforts.

Our Partners

Memberships & Coalitions

Railbelt Reliability Council – *Small Consumer Representative*

Alaska Just Transition Collective - *Partner*

Alaska Financial Partnership Network – *Chair*

Alaska Voter Hub - *Steering Committee*

Alaska Coalition for Justice - *Member*

Alaska's Federal Infrastructure Funds - *Coalition Member*

Renewable Energy Alaska Project (REAP) - *Member*

Consumer Federation of America - *Organization Member & Board Member*

Foraker Group - *Member*

Non-profit Quarterly (NPQ) - *Member*

Organizational Partners

Alaska Center

Alaska Community Action on Toxics

Native Movement

Alaska AFL-CIO

Anchorage Community Land Trust

Native Peoples Action

Money Management International

Alaska Poor People's Campaign

Cook Inlet Housing Authority

Foraker Group

Alaska Legal Services Corporation

Alaska Courts System

Renewable Energy Alaska Project

Cook Inletkeeper

Susitna River Coalition

Fairbanks Climate Action Coalition

NAACP, Anchorage Chapter

Alaska Black Caucus

ACLU of Alaska

Planned Parenthood Votes

Alaska Housing Finance Corporation

YWCA of Alaska

Refugee Assistance and Immigrant Services
(RAIS)

Doyon Foundation

Alaska Literacy Program

Alaska Children's Trust

Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium
(ANTHC)

Stand Up AK

Out North

Tanana Chiefs Conference

Our Funding

Through contributions and grants, we have amplified the work and uplifted voices joined together to address the issues we aim to resolve. From writing public comments, to showing up at events, to donating — ***we could not do this work without you.*** This year alone, contributions from our Alaskan neighbors have been crucial to settling dozens of payday loans, shaping the vision of internet access locally and nationally, taking on corrupt actors in our state and local government, starting bilingual citizenship classes and far more. Thank you for being with us in this movement.

We are thankful for support from the following organizations:

Sociological Initiatives Foundation
Alaska Department of Health
Municipality of Anchorage & United Way
Tortuga Foundation
Alaska Conservation Foundation
Solidaire Network
Alaska Community Foundation's Ruud-Mjos Fund
Movement Voter Project
Americans for Financial Reform Education Fund
Native Movement & the Alaska Just Transition Collective
Western, Rural and Plains States (WRAPS) Project
Rural Democracy Initiative
Alaskans for Better Elections



To make a donation, visit akpirg.org/donate.



Looking Ahead

2024 marks the 50th Anniversary of the Alaska Public Interest Research Group. Since our founding on October 21, 1974, AKPIRG has been advocating for the public interest in Alaska – and we have much to celebrate after five decades of advocacy! In addition to continuing our regular advocacy throughout 2024, we look forward to sharing many trips down memory lane, and to celebrating our legacy together at events in Anchorage, Juneau, and Fairbanks.

If you were involved in AKPIRG as a member, staff, board, or volunteer at any time in the past 50 years, we want to hear about your experience with AKPIRG! Reach out to info@akpirg.org to get involved in the storytelling of our 50th Anniversary.

Most importantly, thank you for being an AKPIRG Advocate, whether this is your first day or your 50th year as a member. It has been an honor to be working for robust language access, affordable energy and broadband, economic justice, and government accountability and transparency, for almost 50 years. Cheers to 50 more years of AKPIRG Advocacy!

Thank You

As an advocacy organization working towards changing harmful systems, we can achieve so much more with the support of many hands and minds and our community members like you. As Alaskans, we all continue to make the progress and changes necessary for the future we all hope to see. Thank you for joining us. We are so grateful you also believe in AKPIRG's work and what positive change can happen when we all work together. From the AKPIRG staff and board, we are so thankful for your dedication to equity and accountability.

