

# STANDING UP TO POWERFUL INTERESTS

DEFEND TRUTH  DEMAND ACTION

**ALASKA PUBLIC INTEREST  
RESEARCH GROUP**

## Annual Report

2018 – 2019

# Who We Are

Created in 1974, AKPIRG is a non-profit, non-partisan, citizen-oriented statewide membership organization, researching, educating and advocating on behalf of the public interest. AKPIRG advances the public interest by providing individuals with the opportunity and the information to participate equally in and be treated equally by the economic, social and political systems



**Our core values are justice, community, and accountability.**



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# LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

Alaskans are not getting a fair shake. We are constituents to a political process that is becoming increasingly polarized and driven by powerful interests. As consumers, we have grown reliant on corporations that answer to shareholders before the public interest. Facing the deterioration of civic institutions, increasing corporate power, and a rapidly changing natural world, the need for AKPIRG has never been greater.

Especially when at odds with the short-term gain of those in power, we must fight for the long-term wellbeing of Alaska communities.

Physically, our food and environment must be free from waste and toxic substances. We must bolster systems that promote mental health, employ restorative justice, address adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and ensure educators are culturally competent.

Financially, our systems must be geared towards *helping* the consumer, rather than maximizing corporate profits. Payday lending and debt collection practices must be rethought and realigned to create a low-dollar financial products industry that does not abuse consumers.

Communally, we envision localized, strong economies that include protections for workers' rights, environmental health, and sustainable industries. We must have community culture-bearers who ground our present in our collective memories through art, and we must dismantle historically oppressive systems through truth and justice healing initiatives.

The need to prioritize long-term wellbeing over short-term gain is not new, but is more urgent now than ever. We know we cannot get there working alone. We have started new coalitions, and joined established ones. I am grateful and humbled each day to do the important work we do, together.

Sincerely,



Veri di Suvero  
AKPIRG Executive Director

# AKPIRG UPDATES

## BOARD ACTIVITY

This year, the former AKPIRG Board Chair Steve Cleary stepped down from the board after over a decade of service. Nelta Edwards assumed the role of Board Chair. The board additionally lost Zack Fields, who stepped down after being elected to the Alaska Legislature. Ira Slomski-Pritz and Genevieve Mina were both selected to join the board this year.

The AKPIRG board meets monthly. Since a strategic planning retreat in April, the Board has set up Standing and At-will committees, revised the by-laws, and continues to refine the strategic plan.



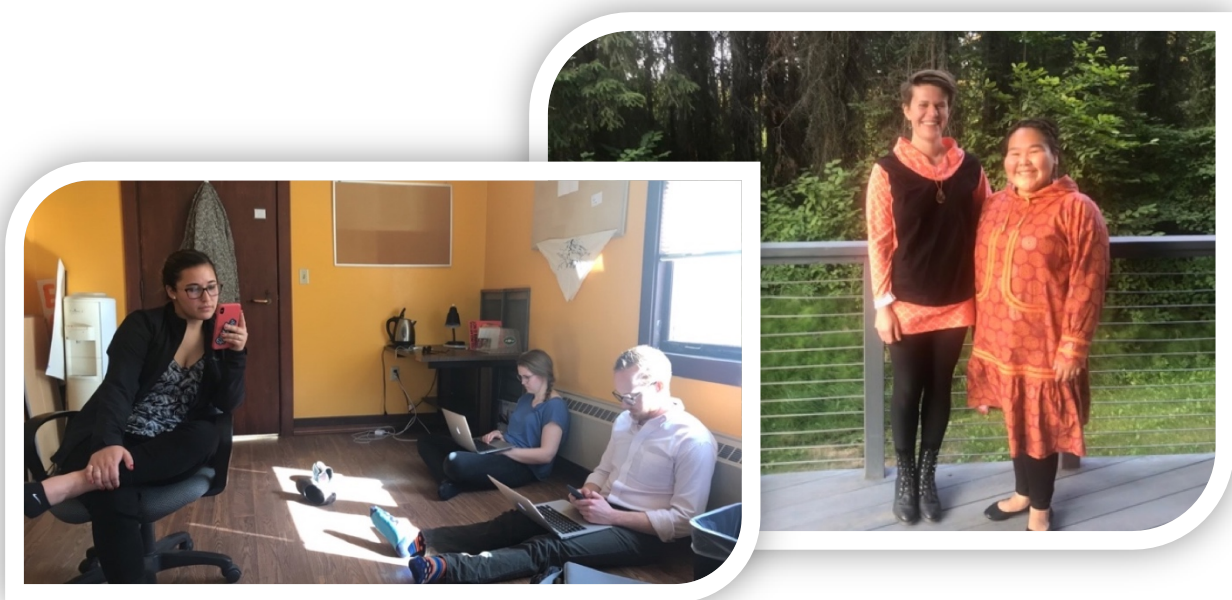
## STAFF ACTIVITY

Jill Yordy, former AKPIRG ED, started grad school in September 2018. Veri di Suvero became ED after her, and AKPIRG has grown under a year of Veri's leadership. Starting as a part-time Director, Veri has since moved to full-time. AKPIRG has added another part-time staff as well as hosting a Summer Intern.

AKPIRG's intern, Timotheen Charles, was a First Alaskans Institute Intern, who did a paid internship to work on Census outreach.

AKPIRG's newest staff members are Nathaniel Knapp, a software consultant originally from Anchorage, Erin Willahan, a project management consultant on Alaska Native language translations, and Rochelle Adams, an Indigenous language consultant for engaging to Alaska Native communities.

As a major capacity building project, Leadership Anchorage from the Alaska Humanities Forum volunteered four dedicated individuals to develop a redistricting communications plan as one of the 2018-2019 Community Impact Projects.





## OPERATIONAL

AKPIRG has a new office, located in downtown Anchorage at 308 G St. Members are welcome to come work there. AKPIRG's digital presence has become more prominent through a new website: [AKPIRG.org](https://www.akpirg.org) and frequent Facebook and Instagram posts.

## FINANCIAL

All of AKPIRG's main initiatives are grant-funded, and in 2019 AKPIRG deepened its engagement with grantmakers. AKPIRG's work is made possible through ongoing grants from the Americans for Financial Reform Education Fund, the Alaska Conservation Foundation, the Alaska Community Foundation's Social Justice Fund, and the Alaska Community Foundation's Native Rights Social Justice Fund.

AKPIRG participated in 2019 Pick.Click.Give for the fourth time since 2009, and received an 85% increase in giving. As of September 2019, AKPIRG has 83 passionate sustaining donors. AKPIRG additionally had a 120% increase in one-time donations from the previous year.



# AKPIRG BY THE NUMBERS



PUBLIC TESTIMONY: 23  
WRITTEN TESTIMONY: 12  
ORAL TESTIMONY: 11



INDIVIDUAL DONORS: 100+  
SUSTAINING DONORS: 85  
FIRST-TIME DONORS: 13



COMMENT CARDS: 119



VOLUNTEERS: 18



LITERATURE DISTRIBUTED: 30 +



BOARD MEMBERS: 6



SIGN-ON LETTERS: 20



FULL-TIME STAFF: 1



EARNED MEDIA: 6



TRAININGS HOSTED: 8



GENERATED MEDIA SPOTS: 7



EVENTS TABLED: 8



GRANTS AWARDED: 7



SPEAKING ENGAGEMENTS: 2



FELLOWSHIPS AWARDED: 2



STATE & US CAPITOL VISITS: 5



# WHAT WE'RE DOING

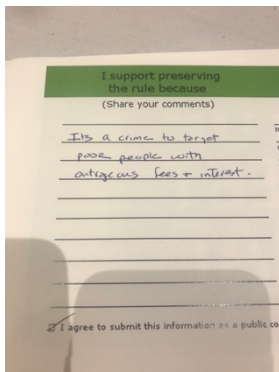
## CONSUMER EMPOWERMENT

### PAYDAY LENDING



**THE ISSUE:** Payday loans are small-dollar loans with extreme interest rates. high-cost loans. Alaska's average annual interest rate on a 14-day, \$100 loan is 520%. This greatly disadvantages already disadvantaged people. For example, a parent who is unable to cover costs for food, rent, etc. until payday takes out a

\$100 loan. Two weeks later, they will be expected to pay \$20.80 on top of the \$100 she already was struggling to find. Often, people will pay just the interest on a loan (the \$20.80) and come back in two weeks to try to pay off the \$100, as well as another \$20.80 that accrued in the subsequent two weeks. They can easily end up paying \$100 of interest on a \$100 loan, badly damaging her credit score and financial security. And there is no legal threshold in Alaska limiting the number of outstanding loans a person can have, pushing low-income and primarily low-income people of color, into financial crisis.



**AKPIRG's RESPONSE:** AKPIRG launched an education and advocacy campaign to raise awareness and change policy around payday lending. We hosted community events educating the public about the dangers of payday lending. AKPIRG ran a comment-writing campaign when the Consumer Finance Protection Bureau (CFPB) announced a proposed rule change that would repeal protections for consumers who take out payday loans.

# DEBT COLLECTION



**THE ISSUE:** 71 million Americans have debt in collections, and debt collectors call over 1 billion times a year. Often debt collectors will harass people, call their bosses or their children, use foul or threatening languages, and take people to court for much larger sums than they owe.



**AKPIRG'S RESPONSE:** In 2019, AKPIRG started a Know Your Rights campaign to ensure that individuals know their rights when a debt collector calls. Working with the Courts System, Alaska Legal Services, and Money Management International (an Anchorage credit counseling non-profit), AKPIRG has hosted trainings in towns across the

state. AKPIRG collected comments to submit to the Consumer Finance Protection Bureau protesting their lax rulemaking, which benefits debt collectors and not consumers.



# WAGE THEFT



**THE ISSUE:** Almost 50% of Anchorage renters are “rent burdened” – paying more than 30% of their income on rent. Studies of low-wage industries estimate that 66% of workers experience at least one form of wage theft. Wage theft is a practice by which a worker is denied access to their rightful wages or benefits. Wage theft is a highly prevalent and damaging form of labor exploitation that is under-scrutinized and under-reported, particularly in Alaska.



**AKPIRG’s RESPONSE:** AKPIRG released a wage theft report synthesizing Alaska Department of Labor data from 2012-2018 in Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Juneau to estimate recent violations, including: wage claims, collections, child labor law violations, and workers’ compensation.

## SPOTLIGHT: ALASKA FINANCIAL PARTNERSHIP NETWORK

The Alaska Financial Partnership Network is a group of 60+ organizations working to develop a system of services so that Anchorage families increase their income and save for the future. The Network has worked on several initiatives, including annual Alaska Saves campaigns, which strives to help individuals save money, reduce debt, and build wealth.

In August 2019, AKPIRG assumed the role of chair of this Network, and will work to expand the reach of the Network, and increase its community impact. To increase engagement within the Network, AKPIRG created four different working groups that focus on: identifying consumer policy gaps, determining the Network’s next steps, increasing information sharing between groups, and developing financial coaching materials for front-line providers. AKPIRG works closely with the Anchorage Mayor’s Office, which appointed a liaison to the Network to implement their Cities for Financial Empowerment initiative.

# CONSUMER SAFETY

## FLAME RETARDANT CHEMICALS

**THE ISSUE:** Flame Retardants chemicals are commonly found in household products and have been shown to cause neurological damage, hormone disruption, and cancer. Unsafe chemicals create high risks for customers and damage trusting relationships between consumers and businesses.



**AKPIRG's RESPONSE:** AKPIRG staff and board members worked to make the consumer case for Alaska Community Action on Toxics (ACAT)'s successful campaign to pass an Anchorage Ordinance banning Flame Retardant Chemicals. AKPIRG is now working with ACAT to move a similar bill through the State Legislature.

## TOXIC TOYS

**THE ISSUE:** Toxic toys are bought and sold every day. As an example, toy slime products contain toxic levels of boron and Amazon has failed to appropriately label choking hazards.

**AKPIRG's RESPONSE:** AKPIRG released the US PIRG Toy Report on November 26, 2018, which details new categories of toxic toys to protect children from, including toys that can record individuals without having to report or regulate what information they are tracking.



## PFAS

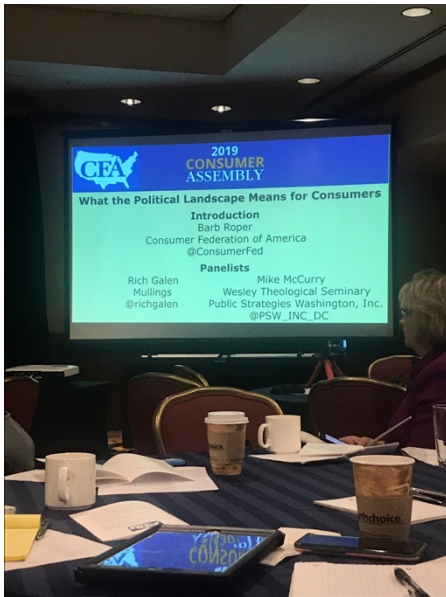
**THE ISSUE:** PFAS is a group of chemicals that are made to repel water and oil. They are commonly in food packaging wrappers, and often seep into food and groundwater. PFAS exposure is linked to diseases including cancer, liver damage, decreased fertility, and increased risk of asthma and thyroid disease.



**AKPIRG's RESPONSE:** AKPIRG is working with the national group, Safer Chemicals Healthy Families, to test Per- and poly- fluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) in Anchorage. AKPIRG collected samples and sent them to the national lab for sampling, and will publicize the results in a final report.

## FOOD SECURITY

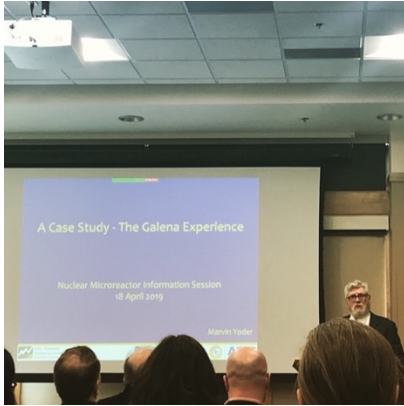
**THE ISSUE:** USDA is repealing Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits for Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWD). The State of Alaska is compounding this by repealing State-distributed SNAP benefits. This will severely impact the food security of most rural Alaskan communities, where SNAP makes up 50% of grocery store revenues.



**AKPIRG's RESPONSE:** AKPIRG submitted public comments at both the State and Federal level urging the USDA not to repeal SNAP benefits. AKPIRG is advising and outreaching about the Food Bank of Alaska and the Alaska Poor People's Campaign in putting together a Speakers Bureau to help currently or formerly food insecure individuals develop public speaking and advocacy skills.

# UTILITIES

## ELECTRIC UTILITIES



**THE ISSUE:** Electric utilities do not currently need Alaska’s Regulatory Commission approval to build new generation sources. Six interconnected utilities collectively serving 500,000 people have overbuilt the grid in new generation projects due to political differences, costing ratepayers \$1.49 billion in unnecessary spending in a region that could be served by a half of just one efficient generation plant.

**AKPIRG’s RESPONSE:** As the only non-profit consumer advocate in the State, AKPIRG’s voice at the Regulatory Commission of Alaska is critical in ensuring ratepayers concerns are at the fore.

To prioritize consumer interests, AKPIRG is working with utilities to create a Railbelt Reliability Council that would ensure the most cost- and energy-efficient dispatch throughout the grid. Furthermore, AKPIRG is working with interested organizations to educate Electric co-op members on energy policy, and actively working to engage those member-owners to participate in their electric Co-operative.

Along those lines, AKPIRG launched a new Alaska Energy Transparency Project, a forum for cooperative members to report on Utility board meetings, making meetings more accessible and providing a citizen’s tool hold Utility boards accountable. AKPIRG Director Veri di Suvero was chosen as an Energy Democracy Fellow, run by the organization We Own It. This year-long fellowship focuses on building power amongst co-op member-owners and organizing around policy issues.



## BROADCASTING



**THE ISSUE:** Through zeroing out all state funding for public radio, the proposed 2019 state operating budget posed an existential threat to public broadcasting.

**AKPIRG's RESPONSE:** AKPIRG submitted written testimony to the House Community and Regional Affairs Committee opposing the elimination of the Alaska Public Broadcasting Commission (HB69).

## TELECOMMUNICATIONS & BROADBAND

**THE ISSUE:** The Alaska legislature considered legislation (SB 83) that guts the mandate that compels telecoms to serve rural Alaska, and in 2019 passed a revised SB 83 that keeps rural protections but severely deregulates the telecoms industry.

**AKPIRG's RESPONSE:** AKPIRG worked to oppose legislation by talking with State legislators, submitting written testimony to the State House Committee on Labor and Commerce, and organizing other stakeholders to testify against the bill. Unfortunately, the legislation passed and means that telecoms will be deregulated, although the Carrier of Last Resort Provision will still stand.



AKPIRG engaged Senator Murkowski on the issue and joined the coalition Fight For Our Future to advocate for net neutrality in the Senate. Director di Suvero wrote an op-ed during the Brett Kavanaugh congressional hearings to encourage Senator Murkowski to vote no on Kavanaugh's appointment due to his disregard for consumer protections.

# GOOD GOVERNANCE

## MONEY OUT OF POLITICS

**THE ISSUE:** Donna Arduin, the director of the Alaska Office of Management and Budget, has a history of allocating state funds to for-profit prisons companies to which she is connected.



**AKPIRG's RESPONSE:** AKPIRG submitted a request through the Alaska Public Records Act, for written records between Donna Arduin and any representatives of the private prison companies she used to work for, since her hire date. Despite follow-ups, we still have not received an answer.

AKPIRG advocated against the budget proposal to send prisoners out of State—to private prisons—and advocated against the state's actions to privatize the Alaska Psychiatric Institute (API) as well as plans to privatize Pioneer Homes.

## LEGISLATIVE SESSION



**THE ISSUE:** The impact of the Governor's proposed budget was significant and motivated by corporate profit rather than benefiting Alaskans.

**AKPIRG's RESPONSE:** AKPIRG's mission compelled the organization to redirect staff-time and resources to respond to the Governor's budget vetoes. AKPIRG quickly launched an education campaign to inform the public about the potential impacts of the budget impacts. AKPIRG joined the Save Our State coalition and created and disseminated education materials on budget impacts.

## ETHICS



**THE ISSUE:** The current administration breached several ethical guidelines. Most notably, Governor Dunleavy used state funding to pay for partisan mailers directed towards a few key legislators.

**AKPIRG's RESPONSE:** AKPIRG tracked the actions of the Dunleavy administration and communicated ethical breaches to the public. Additionally, AKPIRG submitted public testimony supporting the strengthening of a state ethics bill.

## ELECTORAL REFORM

**THE ISSUE:** Most of the State does not have consistent access to voting locations. Four polling places in rural Alaska have been closed since the gutting of the Voting Rights Act through *Shelby County v. Holder* in 2013. Discriminatory access compounded by logistical challenges create the need for non-traditional voting methods, including vote-at-home systems.



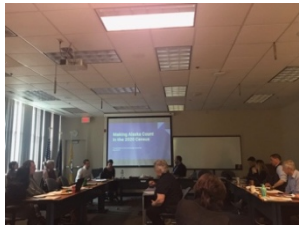
**AKPIRG's RESPONSE:** AKPIRG joined the Voting Rights working group, comprised of various Alaskan c3 organizations working to create consensus and education around good voting policy, including vote-at-home and permanent absentee voting measures.

At a national level, AKPIRG joined Declaration For American Democracy (DFAD), a coalition of more than 130 groups working to advance democracy reform on the local, state and national level.

## CENSUS 2020

**THE ISSUE:** There is a federal attack on conducting a complete and accurate count through the proposed addition of the citizenship question plus severe funding shortages which have prevented any pre-Census communications sent to PO Boxes in the country. Although vital, the Census will not be translated into Alaska Native languages. Given this, there will be a severe undercount of Alaska Native communities.

**AKPIRG's RESPONSE:** AKPIRG joined the Alaska Census Working Group, a group of 45+ organizations across various sectors in Alaska. The Alaska Community Foundation awarded AKPIRG an Alaska Native Social Justice Fund grant to conduct Census translation. Due to Director di Suvero's background in language access and Alaska Native languages, AKPIRG is coordinating state-wide language access. Locally, di Suvero was appointed a commissioner to the Anchorage Complete Count Commission.



AKPIRG's First Alaskans Institute summer intern, Timotheen Charles, developed a rural communications outreach plan. AKPIRG has hired a Language Access Census Consultant, as well as an Indigenous Language Access Consultant to support translation efforts.

## REDISTRICTING

**THE ISSUE:** In 2021, a Redistricting Commission will redraw voting boundaries for the next decade. With a hyper-partisan government in control, it is critical to make sure the public is aware of this process and the importance of responding to the Census.

**AKPIRG's RESPONSE:** AKPIRG is coordinating a non-partisan coalition named Alaskans For Fair Redistricting. The group is working with lawyers to analyze the impact of *Shelby County v. Holder*, which gutted the Voting Rights Act. Leadership Anchorage selected AKPIRG's redistricting initiative as a Community Impact Project to develop a communications plan to inform the public about the redistricting process. AKPIRG's software consultant Nathaniel Knapp is creating maps based on current available data to begin analyzing possibilities for an equitable redistricting process.





# LOOKING FORWARD

## IN THE OFFICE

AKPIRG is looking forward to a year that prioritizes stability and outreach. To those ends, AKPIRG is hiring a language access census coordinator, to ensure that AKPIRG does the best job possible for language access on the Census. AKPIRG's team is excited for another year of added capacity to protect and empower consumers.

## WITH OUR PARTNERS

As an incorporated non-profit charitable entity with a 501(c)3 designation, AKPIRG has the ability to fiscally sponsor groups that are not incorporated but are doing great work at the community level. Our mission is to advocate for consumers, and part of that is providing support to organizations who are community advocates. We are currently talking with a few groups and hope to help organizations receive and manage funds.

Additionally, AKPIRG plans to start a sub-grant program that encourages organizations to focus on consumer issues.

## ON THE ISSUES

As the chair of the Alaska Financial Partnership Network, AKPIRG aims to revitalize a promising and critical service component for Alaskans. AKPIRG received a grant from the Alaska Community Foundation to host a consumer protection coalition summit, and is working with various partners, including IBEW, AARP, Alaska Saves, and Americans for Financial Reform, to create an impactful and useful experience.

Working with the Municipality of Anchorage, AKPIRG is developing a series of Know Your Rights cards for the Census and Debt Collection. We are excited to continue our collaboration with the Municipality and hope to find new ways to communicate the importance of these often overlooked issues.



As part of the Energy Democracy Fellowship, AKPIRG will be hosting an education series in the fall on utilities. The first will be co-hosted with REAP and will be an explanation of current activities in the railbelt region. Director di Suvero has talked with Matanuska Electric Association about co-hosting a “reading your utility bill” workshop. AKPIRG will continue to be in talks with various utilities to be a part of the Railbelt Reliability Council’s Implementation Committee, and we are looking forward to offering a meaningful consumer-driven voice as a part of that Committee.

It is critical that Alaskans understand and give feedback during the redistricting process. AKPIRG been working to modify software so that the public can access redistricting mapping tools and determine how their communities can be a member of an equitable voting district.

There are many more policy gaps to identify in the State. University of Alaska’s economic research center does not know the market price of natural gas. Director di Suvero was selected as a Vanguard—through the Next City program, they will participate in an international Fellowship to understand problems facing urban centers and methods to revitalize cities without exacerbating greater wealth disparities.



# WHO WE WORK WITH

## AKPIRG COALITION MEMBERSHIPS

Alaska Financial Partnership Network – Chair  
 Anchorage Complete Count Committee – Commissioner  
 Alaskan Artists for a Just Transition – Steering Committee  
 Alaska Census Working Group – Steering Committee  
 Alaska Renewable Energy Coalition (AREC) – Coordinator  
 Courts System Legal Navigator – Consumer Protection Advisor  
 Alaska Food Coalition – Member  
 Save Our State – Member  
 Voting Rights Working Group - Member  
 National Community Reinvestment Coalition – Member  
 Declaration for American Democracy – Member  
 Americans for Financial Reform – Member  
 Renewable Energy Alaska Project – Member  
 Consumer Federation of America – Member  
 National LGBTQ Task Force - Member  
 Railbelt Reliability Council – Applying Entity

## CURRENT GRANTING ORGANIZATIONS

Americans For Financial Reform Education Fund  
 Alaska Community Foundation  
     Social Justice Fund  
     Alaska Native Social Justice Fund  
 We Own It  
     Energy Democracy Fellowship  
 Alaska Conservation Foundation

## COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Alaska Community Action on Toxics  
 Alaska Center  
 Alaska Legal Services Corporation  
 RAIS  
 Municipality of Anchorage  
 Bread Line Stone Soup  
 Anchorage Courts System  
 Credit Union 1  
 Anchorage Community Land Trust  
 Anchorage Public Library  
 Wasilla Public Library  
 IBEW  
 AFL-CIO  
 Cook Inletkeeper  
 Renewable Energy Alaska Project  
 Fairbanks Climate Action Coalition  
 Susitna River Coalition  
 Northern Center  
 Native People’s Action  
 Planned Parenthood Votes  
     Northwest and Hawaii  
 ACLU of Alaska  
 YWCA  
 Alaska AARP  
 Money Management International  
 NAACP, Anchorage Chapter  
 Anchorage Senior Activity Center  
 Cook Inlet Lending Center  
 Cook Inlet Housing Authority  
 Alaska Federation of Natives  
 First Alaskans Institute  
 Alaska Move to Amend  
 Alaska Poor People’s Campaign  
 Christians for Equality Network

# GET INVOLVED

## **Become a Member**

Are you interested in becoming an AKPIRG member? As a member, you receive updates on upcoming events, news articles, and more. To become a member, sign up at [akpirg.org/getinvolved](http://akpirg.org/getinvolved)

## **Volunteer**

We're always looking for volunteers to help out with events or lending expertise in any capacity!

## **Donate**

If you don't have time to work on consumer protection, you can contribute to AKPIRG so we do the work you value! We're a small and scrappy team, and a donation goes a long way. You can donate at [akpirg.org](http://akpirg.org)

## **Join Our Board**

AKPIRG's board is looking to add members! If you're interested in joining our board or one of our committees, please contact us at [akpirg@gmail.com](mailto:akpirg@gmail.com)