

Championing Alaska's Youth: The PMI Alaska Chapter and PMIEF Help Camp Fire Alaska

By Valerie Neff Newitt

The value of project management is magnified in inaccessible areas of Alaska, where planning can be the difference between life and death. While this northernmost state offers a wealth of unsurpassed beauty, it also hosts an unpredictable climate that can make delivery routes impassable, cutting off supplies of food, medicine, transport and more to remote and isolated towns. It all underscores the importance of teaching the basics of project management to community organizations as a means to ensuring their consistency and effectiveness.



“Young Alaskans have a tremendous need for project management skills by virtue of their location,” says Josiane Ballin, MSPM, PMP. Josiane is the PMI Educational Foundation (PMIEF) liaison for the PMI Alaska Chapter (PMIAK), PMIAK past president and vice president of volunteers.

“Because of extreme weather conditions, logistics and supply chains are always an issue for Alaskans,” explains Josiane, who

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originally comes from a warmer Brazilian climate and works as a project manager for the development of Brazilian steakhouses in the Pacific Northwest.

When Josiane and a team of volunteers presented two six-hour training courses in May 2018 on behalf of the PMI Alaska Chapter to 40 Alaskan nonprofit organizations (which comprise the second largest industry in Alaska as far as number of jobs), Eva Welch, executive assistant, Camp Fire Alaska, Anchorage, was on hand to hear the central messages. The main takeaway being that project management is a useful

organizational tool and PMIEF's Project Management Skills for Life® resource material offers access to that empowerment.

Message Sent, Message Received

"The goal was to deliver meaningful information so that nonprofit partners could do their work better," says Josiane. "We started in Anchorage and Juneau, and the expansion of the program to other locations of Alaska is in our chapter's strategic plan" Josiane adds. Indeed, Eva digested the communication, and contacted Josiane for even more guidance.

"We needed help pulling together a registration project for three summer youth programs and our fall before- and after-school programs, which spanned three departments," Eva details, "but we had communication disconnects between departments." Josiane was delighted to find assistance from PMIEF's resources.

Camp Fire Alaska offers licensed before- and after-school care in Anchorage and Eagle River as well as a summer adventure program when school is out. Additionally, three community centers serve at-risk youth at no



cost to families. The agency also operates two American Camp Association-accredited camps—Camp K on Kenai Lake is Alaska’s longest running, co-ed overnight camp, and Camp Si-La-Meo is an outdoor adventure day camp located in Anchorage. Their Rural Alaska Program serves over 30 communities and nearly 2,000 participants promoting healthy life skills, creative arts, outdoor recreation and activities for teens, service projects and community events.

Josiane asked PMIAK volunteer Melody Khounsavath, a project analyst for Alaska USA Federal Credit Union, to help Eva and her team, emphasizing that “helping them allows them to be more effective in their work with youth.”

Melody was thrilled to work with Camp Fire Alaska, which provides children with an opportunity for self-discovery in a fun, safe learning environment.



“I worked with youth organizations in the past, so this association really appealed to me,” she said. “When Eva detailed that her challenges spanned scheduling, tracking projects, task ownership and deadline completion, she thought she needed a new system or application. However, she was under budget constraints, and I knew training and maintenance on a new system would be both difficult and cost prohibitive.”

When Melody examined the programs Eva already had available, she realized Eva was not taking full advantage of a calendar system already in place.

“We were able to set up a master calendar that could be shared with staff members,” says Melody. “The calendar easily tracks projects, sends out task reminders, deadline alerts and more. It is a simple but ideal solution. Even better, it didn’t require any additional money at all.”

“The interaction with Camp Fire Alaska made me feel great,” says Melody. “It also struck me that it is so much better for money to be spent on kids in the program rather than on unnecessary software. It was a success.”

Eva agrees, noting: “This first-time experience working with PMIEF [resources] and PMIAK was rewarding; they were supportive and patient with our requests and changes.”

Relationship Building

Josiane sees it as an opportunity to begin an expanding relationship with an outstanding nonprofit agency. “Eva is reaching out to other departments at Camp Fire Alaska to determine how PMIAK can help them. Hopefully, this is just the beginning of our association. PMIEF is actively working with PMI chapters to effectively connect with and empower youth-serving organizations. We are using those relationships as jumping-off points to more direct youth projects. I advocate for that.”

Josiane believes project management skills are particularly important to Alaskan youth. “There are so many difficult, unpredictable conditions in everyday life here. It is essential for young people to learn how to plan for activities, studies, careers and life goals. In Alaska, it is essential to be very good at planning and scheduling—both of which are right out of the project management skill set.” Josiane points out the purpose of Project Management for Social Good® promoted by her chapter. “PMIAK volunteers are committed to working on projects with youth-serving nonprofits who are dedicated to offering Alaskan programs, which provide kids with the skill set they need to lead a successful life, such as Camp Fire Alaska. We can all make a big difference here.”