



Testimony of Etta Kuzakin
President of Agdaguux Tribe of King Cove, Lifelong resident

Testifying Before U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and
Transportation
Subcommittee on Oceans, Atmosphere, Fisheries, and Coast Guard

Regarding
U.S. Coast Guard – Medevacs in isolated King Cove, Alaska during harsh weather

Nov. 16, 2017

Good morning, Chairman Sullivan, Ranking Member Peters and Members of the Subcommittee. My name is Etta Kuzakin. I am an Aleut and President of the Agdaagux Tribe of King Cove, Alaska. I was born and raised, and continue to live in King Cove, an isolated community surrounded by spectacular beauty. It is the land of my ancestors. The Aleut People have inhabited the area for more than 4,000 years. King Cove is a tight-knit community, and a wonderful place to raise a family. My husband and I have three beautiful daughters ranging in age from 4 to 20 years.

Today, I am speaking to you not only as President of the Agdaguux Tribe, but as a mother who nearly lost my youngest child and possibly my own life, were it not for the courageous men and women of the Coast Guard who came to my rescue more than four and a half years ago.

Because our community has no hospital or doctor, we must travel 600 miles to Anchorage for most medical procedures. Our local clinic is staffed with wonderful, dedicated employees, but there is only so much the health aides can do with limited resources. The clinic is unable to handle trauma, heart and respiratory complications and childbirth. I am unable to give birth naturally and must have cesarean sections, another complication beyond the capability of our small clinic.

In March 2013, I went into early labor. Despite my careful plans to travel to Anchorage well ahead of my due date, my baby had plans of her own. Gale-force winds were howling that day. I knew, as I waited at our clinic, that no flights were going to make it into King Cove. My fears were later confirmed. I was in no condition to attempt crossing the choppy bay by boat. My only hope was for the Coast Guard to send a helicopter from Kodiak for me. Without them, I wouldn't have been able to get out, and neither I nor my daughter would be here today to tell our story. Thankfully, after waiting for several hours, they came. The winds were so strong, that the Coast Guard pilots had to maneuver the helicopter carefully so the doors wouldn't get blown in. They were able to land safely in Cold Bay so I could be transferred to a medevac plane and flown to Anchorage.

I know it's not the job of the Coast Guard to medevac pregnant women, but I thank God every day for their courageous, selfless devotion to the people of Alaska and their willingness to put themselves in harm's way to ensure our safety. It's because of the men and women of the Coast Guard station Kodiak that my beautiful daughter, Sunnie Rae, is alive.

Today, she is a joyful, energetic, wonderful four-year-old, and I cannot imagine my life without my precious little girl. Every time my daughter smiles, I am reminded of how easily things could have turned out differently. Not every story has ended as happily as mine. From 1980 to 2003, 18 people have died because of plane crashes during severe weather or an inability to get timely medical care.

Since former Interior Secretary Sally Jewell denied our road in December 2013, there have been 68 medevacs from King Cove. Seventeen of those patients were seriously ill or injured and were medevaced by the Coast Guard. I am grateful that all of them, including our Coast Guard personnel, made it out safely.

Our notoriously harsh and unpredictable weather on the Alaska Peninsula means that some Coast Guard medevacs are not only dangerous for patients, but also for the Coast Guard. At least 30 percent of the time, flights are delayed or cancelled because of gale-force winds, snow squalls or dense fog. Yet, time and time again, the Coast Guard has come to our rescue when no one else could.

We're hopeful that in the near future, we'll have a single-lane gravel road connecting our isolated community to the nearby all-weather Cold Bay Airport, providing a safe and reliable transportation alternative. We have been fighting to have this small road link, through the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge, for more than 35 years for health, safety and quality of life reasons. For us, having the peace of mind of knowing that our loved ones will be safe when traveling to and from King Cove means everything to us.

Until then, I'd like to once again express my profound gratitude to the men and women of the Coast Guard who put their lives on the line day in and day out.

Thank you.