



Director's Message

Greetings!

This past May, we celebrated ISER's 65th anniversary at the Anchorage Museum. That's right: For more than six decades, ISER has helped Alaskans better understand the economic, social, and demographic forces shaping our state. As I begin my tenure as director, I am honored to join an organization with a defining tradition of rigorous, independent research and public service.

Since its founding in 1961, ISER's mission has been to produce and share knowledge that informs public understanding and decision-making across Alaska. Whether we're analyzing Alaska's economy, delving into the details of oil and gas policy, or tracking trends in education, our goal is to provide reliable data and information that helps communities, organizations, and policymakers navigate the most pressing issues that affect our state and our livelihoods.



Director Ian Hartman

Over the past year, ISER researchers have continued to generate impactful work on many of the issues that matter most to Alaska's future. We have strengthened partnerships at

the local and state level and expanded opportunities to bring research into public conversations. These efforts reflect ISER's enduring commitment not only to scholarship, but also to public service.

Looking ahead, I am excited to welcome the Center for Economic Development (CED) into ISER. CED brings expertise in community engagement and applied research that complements ISER's historic strengths and expands our ability to serve Alaskans.

In this newsletter, we highlight the ISER researchers who facilitated healthier meal options for Alaska's largest school district and those who are helping the Municipality of Anchorage consider the financial impact of wildfire risk. We also speak with a researcher on the cutting edge of health care policy and economics.

This newsletter reaches you all in the midst of a heated campaign season, so it is worth emphasizing that ISER's mission has always been, and will always remain, nonpartisan. Our role is to provide the highest-quality research and analysis possible so that elected leaders, community organizations, businesses, and Alaskans can make informed decisions. If our work helps leaders focus on Alaska's long-term well-being, then we will have advanced the principle expressed by Sen. Ted Stevens: "To hell with politics. Just do what's right for Alaska!"

Thank you for being part of this community and for supporting ISER's mission. We look forward to working with you as we continue to serve Alaska over the next 65 years and beyond.

Ian Hartman
Director and Professor of History



ISER hosted colleagues from across the country for CUPSO in May. See page 4.

10,300 Meals: How ISER Data Helped Reshape Anchorage School Lunches

In 2019, Anchorage School District (ASD) parents were concerned that their children weren't getting enough movement at school. They wondered: If students had more time to eat lunch and move during the school day, would they be healthier?

Beginning this school year, 22,000 students across all 57 Anchorage elementary schools are benefiting from a new wellness initiative and nutrition model born out of that question. The rollout marks the completion of a four-year transition away from a pre-packaged tray system that had been in place for nearly 40 years, according to Marci McGill, ASD's student nutrition senior director.

The district is moving toward ingredient-focused meals, and data collected over the last four years by a team based at ISER and the Center for Behavioral Health Research and Services shows students have been eating 31 percent more of their entrées and 29 percent more vegetables. That equates to 1.5 additional servings of vegetables per student per week. Hunger-related visits to school nurses have also dropped, down by 30 visits per year.

31% more entrées consumed
29% more veggies eaten
under ASD's new nutrition model

Not only did the idea for this initiative come from the local community, it took a community to bring it to life and study its effects.

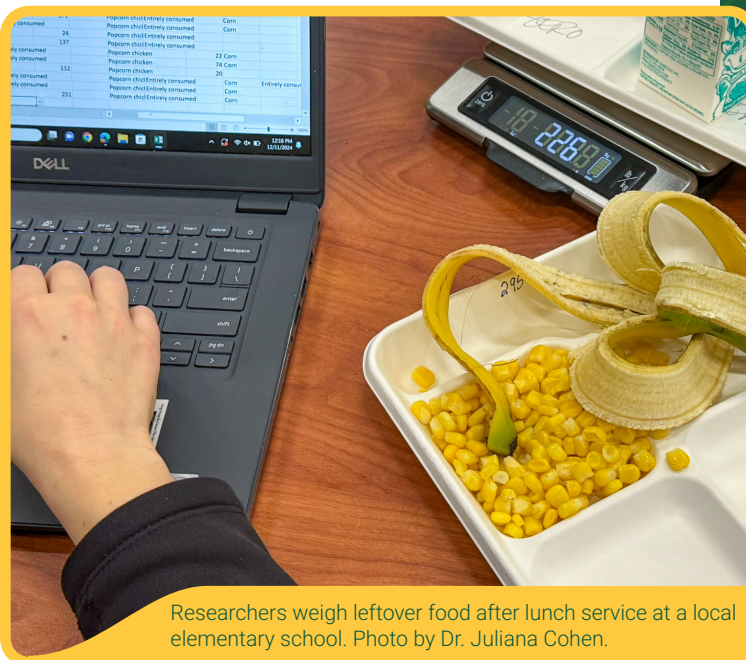
Dr. Juliana Cohen of Merrimack College and Dr. Katie Cueva of the University of Alaska led the collaborative effort, working with a large team of UAA-based researchers and students to collect lunch data. Team members weighed every food item before and after food service at 22 of the district's elementary schools—totaling 10,300 meals over the course of the study, according to Cueva—to calculate the precise percentage of each meal that students consumed.

ISER research professional Rebecca Van Wyck had the chance to return to her own elementary school for data collection. "I was there in the '80s, and I remember the big push toward pre-packaged meals delivered to schools from a central facility," she said.

Walking the halls again brought back good memories and reinforced, for her, why this work matters.

"Well-fed kids are more ready to learn," Van Wyck said.

At a May 2026 Anchorage School Board work session, Cohen noted that the additional nutrition students are consuming every day has direct impacts on their executive functioning, including impulse control and working memory. National research indicates that school lunch participation improves academic outcomes by an amount equivalent to roughly two months of additional learning per school year.



Researchers weigh leftover food after lunch service at a local elementary school. Photo by Dr. Juliana Cohen.

In a related effort, ASD has implemented a wellness initiative in elementary schools that gives students more time to eat and move during the school day. ISER researchers found that students at schools with additional recess and eating time consume 13 percent more milk and 6 percent more fruit during mealtime, on top of the district-wide entrée and vegetable gains.

Looking ahead, McGill said ASD is expanding its scratch cooking initiative, aiming to prepare 75 percent of its food from scratch within the next three years. The district has also tapped ISER to collect breakfast data at a local high school.

Sometimes research starts with a question from the local community. In this case, McGill said the resulting wellness initiative outcomes reflect something bigger than just a meal service change; she believes nutrition is "an essential pillar of the education environment."

"Improved access, improved quality," she said, "is a student success strategy."



ISER in the News: CED Explores Funding Models for Wildfire Prevention

The federal grant supporting Anchorage's wildfire division is set to expire in 2027. As city officials anticipate budgetary constraints, assembly members are exploring if voters would be interested in funding it when the money runs out, per the *Anchorage Daily News*.

With many Anchorage homes and buildings bordering forests and undeveloped land, fire risk in the area is high. The Center for Economic Development (CED) is helping the Anchorage Fire Department evaluate four potential wildfire service area funding options, researching comparable models in California, Colorado, and Utah.

CED plans to propose a service area that encompasses the whole municipality, funding vegetation removal, emergency route maintenance, and community risk reduction programs.

Read ADN's full story by scanning the QR code.



Photo by Airman 1st Class Hunter Hites,
Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson

Faculty Spotlight: Dr. Spencer Perry

Dr. Spencer Perry didn't know he wanted to pursue a career in economic research until he was halfway through his undergraduate studies at Davidson College in North Carolina. After an injury forced him to step back from playing football, he took an econometrics course that introduced him to the types of questions that economic research could ask and the tools researchers could use to answer them. That semester, he learned statistical methods for quantifying the effects of various policies on people and communities. The material was challenging, but it sparked an interest in using data to understand how government programs and institutions shape people's lives.



Dr. Spencer Perry

"I was really excited by the idea that we can use these tools to understand complicated behavioral phenomena, markets, or policies—whatever it may be," he said.

After graduating, Perry worked as a research assistant at the Federal Reserve Board of Governors in Washington, D.C., earned his doctorate in economics from Arizona State University, then moved further west for a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Southern California.

In 2025, Perry made the leap north from the Lower 48, joining the University of Alaska Anchorage as an assistant professor of economics and public policy at ISER. His research spans health, labor, and environmental economics, with a focus on how institutions and incentives shape individual behavior and economic well-being. More recently, he's turned his attention to aging and health, including research on Alzheimer's disease, health insurance decisions, and the financial consequences of cognitive decline.

Perry said one of the most meaningful parts of working at ISER is knowing his research reaches the people making decisions. Last legislative session, he presented data on the prevalence of Alzheimer's and cognitive impairment among Alaska's elderly to legislators and staffers in Juneau.

"Academic researchers always like to say that their work can inform policy," he said, "but in my experience here in Alaska and with ISER, that is truly the case."

Looking ahead, Perry is preparing to submit a study on how public health insurance access affects health care use and health before and after transitioning to Medicare. And with winter on the horizon, he's looking forward to dusting off his ice tools once again.

Celebrating 65 Years of ISER

The Alaska State Legislature passed a law that established the Institute of Social and Economic Research (originally the Institute of Social, Economic and Government Research) in 1961, just two years after statehood. Since then, ISER has been at the forefront of nonpartisan public policy research that lawmakers, business leaders, and community members alike rely on to make decisions.



Outgoing Director Dr. Diane Hirshberg gives remarks at ISER's 65th anniversary celebration.

To celebrate 65 years, Dr. Diane Hirshberg, serving as outgoing director, orchestrated a ceremony at the Anchorage Museum on May 19, 2026. The event gathered faculty, staff, and former directors of the institute, along with a wide network of supporters, leaders, decision-makers, and friends. Anchorage Assembly members added to the milestone by approving a resolution commemorating ISER's decades

of public service to the state of Alaska.

ISER's anniversary coincided with the CUPSO conference. CUPSO—the Consortium of University Public Service Organizations—is an annual meeting of public policy researchers based at universities across the country. This year, ISER welcomed peers to the University of Alaska Anchorage campus for the event, themed “Public Service on the Frontier.” From May 18–20, 2026, researchers from dozens of universities gathered for a series of panels, lightning talks, and roundtable discussions to share their successes and help shape the future of public policy.

Hosting CUPSO in Alaska underscored ISER's own role in bringing rigorous research and scholarship to the state, contributing a vital public service. The same spirit that helps Alaskans make informed decisions today is a legacy ISER will carry into the future.



ISER hosted researchers from across the country at UAA for this year's CUPSO conference.

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