

Village clinics undermined

NOME--Refusal of the federal Indian Health Service and/or Congress to deal with the problems of maintenance and operation of the village clinics is threatening Alaska's rural health care delivery with a spiraling crisis.

This was the message of Bill Dann, executive director of the Norton Sound Health Corporation, as he met with his staff last week.

Dann had just returned from a third meeting in Anchorage where he attempted (to no avail)

to impress the IHS Area Office with their responsibility to find funds for increases in costs of operation or for depreciation of the six-year-old village-owned clinic buildings. (There are a total of 13 clinics in the Norton Sound region). The IHS has leased these buildings or other village buildings from the councils on a continuous basis to be used as community clinics. Although IHS has increased funding to other areas of service, the clinic leases throughout Alaska have received no increases, and thus are not keeping up with inflation.

Last spring Norton Sound Health Corporation offered to take over the leases from IHS, believing they were better equipped logistically to manage them. IHS agreed, but offered to contract for such low figures that it was unacceptable to the Norton Sound Board of Directors and management. Norton Sound then withdrew from the negotiations.

"Apparently IHS has no interest in the future of the clinics," Dann said. "They seem to want to drop the problem on the villages. Yet the village health funds from revenue sharing, about \$4,000 per village, are just enough to pay the alternate health aides, who are

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not covered by IHS, to man the clinics weekends."

This fall Norton Sound Health Corporation reviewed each clinic lease in an effort to arrive at a true cost of operation and maintenance. Figures were updated for costs of oil, electricity, janitorial expenses and allowance for telephone costs for daily medical traffic. The basic rental of \$3.50 per square foot per year, which is to cover maintenance costs, was left as is. It was confirmed that the old lease amounts did not approach today's costs, the worst increase being in fire insurance rates which had tripled this summer.

According to Norton Sound, the average annual clinic operation comes to \$9,125 as of September 1977 whereas IHS leases currently run an average of \$6,000. Dann presented this new evidence to IHS at last week's meeting, with the response that IHS anticipated no increase in lease amounts.

"Norton Sound Health Corporation will not be involved in negotiating such unrealistic leases," Dann said. "Despite our interest, NSHC can do no more than we have to convince IHS area office of the inequity and we have therefore decided to present the problem to our congressional delegation. We will send the city councils what evidence we have completed and recommend that they deal direct with IHS."

A related problem, equally troublesome, is the fact that there is no depreciation bank for the clinics, built by the villages in the early '70's, and now going through the normal Arctic weathering. The congressional delegation has already been approached with this prob-

lem. Who will make up the deficit in cost of clinic operation is the problem before each city council. Several have indicated that they are currently developing letters of complaint to IHS over the lease rates.

"Without a well maintained clinic, it becomes extremely difficult for the health aide to deliver good services," said Sharry Erzinger, the Village Health Services director. "NSHC and IHS have invested a great deal in the training of these aides and the developing of the programs to a level of modern health care delivery. The health status of these communities is completely dependent on the clinics."