Employment opportunities a double-edged sword

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The advantage of having a Native owned and operated business can turn into a two-edged sword when it comes to hiring the shareholders of that corporation, persons attending the recent Tlingit Haida Central Council annual convention in Hoonah learned.

tion and disappointment about the lack of employment opportunities for Native Alaskans, even in their own Sealaska Corporation.

What they were concerned about was inability to get jobs in the open job market and being told to seek employment with Tlingit/Haida and Sealaska. But, when they turn to THCC and Sealaska, they find that it isn't that easy.

Ed Thomas of Ketchikan spoke to the convention about a friend who was seeking a job with the state. Thomas quoted his friend as stating "They said I was overqualified for the job. Of all the reasons not to get a job. Then they asked, 'Why don't you go to Sealaska or to Tlingit-Haida for a job?' "

But Native corporations face the same ban on racial discrimination that other corporations have. Private corporations cannot discriminate against Natives and Native corporations cannot discriminate in favor of Natives even shareholders.

But the belief that Native corporations can hire only their "own," persists.

Another problem facing Na-

tive job seekers is that union membership is required for many jobs within the corporations and their subsidaries, such as Sealaska's Alaska Brick Co. Most shareholders are not union members, many do not know they need to be, and even then, it is often difficult to gain union membership. The result is that many Native Alaskans are prevented from finding employment in the very corporations which they had believed were formed to help them do just that.

There was a call at the convention for efforts by Sealaska and Tlingit and Haida to take steps to inform members seeking employment about union requirements and to find ways to help them break into the unions.

it is a concept not legally sanctioned under Alaska law. There are Native organizations within Alaska which do practice preference toward their people, Woods noted but added that non-Natives often complain of race discrimination when they do so. He stated that he believes that from a national standpoint, Native preference is legal, and he implied that steps are being taken to see that Alaska law recognizes this.

Also it was noted that private corporations have found ways to put language into their policies which legally enabled them to give shareholders preference in hiring. So too, perhaps, could the Native corporations.

Aaron Isaacs, a special consul-

tant for Sealaska, noted that the corporation keeps a "talent bank" on its members to assist in finding shareholders to fill positions.

Shareholder preference also can bring about charges of racial discrimination. Gerald Woods, of the Alaska Human Rights Commission told his fellow Native Alaskans that while states in the Lower 48 recognize Indian preference.

The corporation is distributing to its shareholders revised forms which are longer and seek more information on their job skills and talents than did the old forms.

"I apologize that we're getting to sound like a bureaucracy," Isaacs said, "but the one-to-one information on the sheets is important. It will

improve our effectiveness in getting our shareholders hired. They just have to realize that they are going to have to fill out one more form."

Ellen Hayes, a Convention delegate from Anchorage who also works with the U.S. Forest Service, told the group that federal agencies such as the Forest Service, the Park Service and others will be actively seeking "local hire," primarily Alaska Natives.

"Alaska Native people can have a stabilizing effect for these departments," Hayes explained. "For the most part, they are not looking at the career ladder in such a way that they are tracking across the Lower 48 every two years. They are here to stay. This is good for stability."