

VISTA Volunteer Miss Andrews Files Suit for Job Reinstatement

Objections to the VISTA program in Alaska are once again being raised—only this time they will be heard in court.

Blanche Andrews, a former Vista Volunteer who was fired Jan. 15, the Village of Kongiganek where Miss Andrews was reassigned, and 18 of the village's residents have filed suit in the U.S. District Court in Anchorage seeking reinstatement of Miss Andrews as the village's VISTA volunteer.

Filed against State and Federal officials operating the VISTA program in Alaska, the suit contends that Willie Allen "Arbitrarily, capriciously, and without proper authority terminated Miss Andrews from VISTA."

Allen is the coordinator of the VISTA program in Alaska.

As implied by Allen, the VISTA volunteer was fired because of a letter written by her in November containing criticisms of VISTA program.

According to him, she had acted irresponsibly and had stated her disagreement in a disagreeable manner.

Distributed by her immediate supervisor to volunteers largely in the Bethel area, the letter charges that the VISTA program "is a farce" and does not care what the native people think or want. Miss Andrews called on the volunteers to strive for local control.

The matter of local control has been a topic of controversy for several months now. In January, 51 villages in the Yukon-Kuskokwim area including Kongiganek, adopted a resolution calling for local administration of

the VISTA program. Currently, the program is sponsored by the State.

In the suit, filed by Alaska Legal Services, Miss Andrews, alleges that she cannot be expelled from the program for the letter she wrote because this letter, commenting on a public issue and distributed to other VISTAs by her superior, was within the freedom of speech guarantee of the First Amendment to the Constitution.

Furthermore, she says that VISTA denied her her Constitutional right of due process by not providing a hearing for her, a notice of charges against her, confrontation and cross examination of witnesses, and assistance of counsel.

The Village of Kongiganak, a small Eskimo village in southwest Alaska on the Kuskokwim Bay, claims that the termination of Miss Andrews was done without "consultation, consent, or concurrence" of the village and was thus, a breach of an agreement that the village had with Allen.

In Alaska, the program is sponsored by the State but the villages have the obligation and the authority to supervise the activities of the volunteer.

Miss Andrews had served as a volunteer in the village since Aug. 21, 1968. Ordinarily, volunteers stay in a village only one year but she stayed for a second year at the village's request.

As stated in the suit, during this time, she had worked in the areas of adult education, volunteer Head Start, operation of local government, and aiding individuals in dealing with govern-

ment agencies.

Several villagers were preparing for the General Education Development test this summer with Miss Andrew's help in the hope they could obtain high school diplomas.

Pending developments in the case, she is presently staying on in the village of Kongiganak at the request of the village. The village is helping her with food and fuel, and her landlord is letting her stay, free of charge, in the house she rented as a VISTA volunteer.

The 18 villagers who joined in the suit are participants in and direct beneficiaries of the VISTA program. They, along with other villagers—a total of 30, filed affidavits in support of retaining Miss Andrews.

As stated by her landlord, Roland Phillip, in his affidavit, "All of the people in the village liked her and benefited from her teaching the Adult Education Class.

"I need the money from renting my house but feel the village needs Blanche more than I need the money."

Other typical statements from the villagers:

"In my opinion there was no reason for Blanche Andrews to have been fired from VISTA. She has never been in any trouble whatsoever."

"I wish to see Blanche continue as a VISTA volunteer so our Adult Education program can keep going and we can finish school."

"She helps the people here with their problems and she is always around when they need her."

"She tries to learn the Native ways and respects us."

And as stated by the Village Council President, Evon Azean, "I am disgusted with the VISTA administration for their completely disregarding our feelings out here and their lack of concern for our Adult Education program and how much it means to us... I am very upset that the VISTA administration would fire Blanche and tell her to get out of this village even though everyone here likes her and wants her to stay."

"Her termination from VISTA Alaska has had a bad effect on this whole village."