

ASRAA workshop focuses on communication

by Joan Nockels
for the Tundra Times

The causes of communication difficulty between human service providers and Alaska Native clients was the focus of a workshop sponsored by the Association for Stranded Rural Alaskans in Anchorage last month.

The workshop, held four times a year, is geared toward providing human service professionals a better understanding of Alaska Native people and issues.

The workshops provide "good basic information for people who feel ineffective in their work with Natives," said Mary Wolcott, executive director of ASRAA. They include an overview of Native history and current events, Alaska Native cultures, causes of communication difficulties and counseling tips.

Conference participants included nurses, clinicians, counselors, district attorneys and public defenders.

During the conference, Wolcott broke down the major differences between Native ideology and non-Native ideology — the basic sources of problems of communication.

She explained that Native society accents working for the good of the group, respecting nature and elders, patience and an always present awareness of spirituality.

Major themes of urban society, on the other hand, include accenting the individual over the group, a desire to control nature, a youth-oriented society, aggressiveness and a religion that is present only part of one's life, she said.

With these differences between cultures, Wolcott warned human ser-

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vice providers, "maybe what you're hearing is not really what you think you're hearing."

She added the comments of an ASRAA client: "Those Eskimo ears don't understand white man's talk. Those white man's ears don't understand Eskimo talk."

Throughout the conference, ASRAA staff stressed the fact that human service providers can be more effective in their work with the Native

community if they make an attempt to understand their clients' cultures.

For example, Wolcott said a professional might interpret a Native client's silence in a session as a lack of that person's concern, when really the professional might do better to recognize that silence as a thoughtful time.

Then, she said, it will be possible to "walk in two worlds with one spirit."