

Binkley stresses need for children's funds

by Sen. John Binkley

for the Tundra Times

The efforts of state government on behalf of children — in health, education and social services — have declined in recent years as the state's total spending has declined.

Concerned about the impact budget reductions will have on our children, a special Legislative Children's Caucus has been formed this year.

The caucus, headed by Sen. Joe Josephson of Anchorage, is composed of Republicans and Democrats, senators and representatives, and it crosses both rural and urban concerns. Members of the caucus are working together to protect the interests of Alaska's children.

A major focus of the Children's

Caucus is to advocate for increased funding for children's programs. Funding for many of these programs was greatly reduced in the governor's revised Fiscal Year 1988 budget.

The programs of greatest concern include prematernal services, early intervention services, the Infant Learning Program, Aid for Families with Dependent Children, Public Health Nursing, Head Start, Residential Care, the WIC (Women, Infants and Children) program, community health grants, social services block grants and child physical and sexual abuse programs.

Hearings before the Legislature this year provided us with a grim overview of the status of children:

- Alaska ranks eighth in the nation

in infant mortality.

- Alaska ranks second in post-neonatal deaths.

- Alaska exceeds the national average for babies born with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome by more than 100 percent.

- Juvenile and young adult suicide in Alaska has reached extreme proportions.

- The caseload for child protection workers is five to seven times higher than the national average.

No set of public or private agencies, child-care systems, social workers, teachers or friends can replace the critical role of the child's parents.

The high calling of "parenthood" must be more adequately recognized, respected and honored in our society.

But it is also important to recognize that in today's society government does play an important role in helping parents, including expectant parents, be more effective.

At the time of this writing, final budgetary decisions have not been made. Many of these programs fall within the Health, Education and Social Services budget.

As chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on HESS, I am attempting to meet the priorities of the Children's Caucus within our budget guidelines.