

Future of Legal Aid Program Dimmed by Tiff

"I would like to say something different, but I'm afraid that the future does not look very bright." These were the words of Allen Merson, deputy director of ASCAP, concerning the highly confused condition of Alaska's legal aid to the poor program.

The highly important program came to a screeching halt in Anchorage two weeks ago when lay-members and attorney members of the board of trustees split.

The four lay-members of the board subsequently resigned leaving the board in what is probably an inoperable condition.

The controversy was allegedly over selection of a director for the statewide legal assistance program. A director was never selected, although there was only one final applicant—Allen Merson, designed of the Legal Aid program and ASCAP deputy director. Merson is also an attorney.

Each side accused the other of power plays. However, while most attorney members undoubtedly had genuine misgivings, the Tundra Times learned last week that several members of the board were philosophically opposed

(Continued on Page 8)

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Continued from Page 1

to the program and deliberately interjected confusion into the meeting.

What is the future of the program? According to Merson and others not very bright if Alaska drops the ball now. The legal aid program is federally funded and money is getting tighter on the federal level.

At stake are \$360,000 in federal funds from the Office of Economic Opportunity to run the legal aid program in Alaska. The money has been committed to the Alaska project but not yet transmitted. ASCAP officials fear this money may be in jeopardy.

Flore Lekanof, local

ASCAP coordinator, also pointed out that Alaska is competing with places like Los Angeles and California for legal services money, and that the competition for funds would become greater even on top of the general tightening of federal funds.

Merson, who helped design the legal services program, said he had made every effort to make the program successful.

He told the Tundra Times that originally the board had been made up of equal numbers of members from the legal profession and laymen. He said some attorney had been concerned and that they

had amended the program to give the legal profession a majority on the board.

Merson said he didn't know what else could be done aside from giving the legal profession complete control of the program. He added that he thought the willingness of ASCAP and OEO in San Francisco to go along with giving attorneys a majority on the board certainly indicated they were not trying to run the whole show.

The young ASCAP director said the refusal of the board to accept him as director was no personal tragedy to him but that he was deeply concerned for the future of the program.

"The real tragedy is for about 60,000 Alaskans to whom this program represented the difference between helplessness on one hand, and a knowledge of their rights on the other," Merson said.

"A legal services attorney becomes an advocate for the poor," he stated. "What is needed is a program that results in change, reform, test cases, and new laws as a re-

sult of court judgements."

Merson also pointed out that both the Fairbanks and Anchorage Bar Associations had been concerned about the lack of legal services available to the needy and had committees to investigate the problem.

Expressing concern over possible fragmentation of the legal services program into local areas, Merson said he felt such programs would probably not be adequate.

The bush needs to be served he pointed out, and a locally controlled program could be subject to local pressures.

Legal services attorney would often be facing local attorneys in the courts and would often have to do unpopular things, Merson explained.

He said that locally based legal service attorney should be responsible only to their state director. The state director is responsible to the statewide board on which the local area is represented.

In a talk to the Anchorage Bar Association last Monday Merson told the group that ASCAP's only concern has been a meaningful program to provide legal services to the poor.