

Need for Native justice center becoming urgent

We strongly support creation of a Native justice center in Anchorage to monitor and report on the treatment of Alaska Natives in the state's judicial system. That system is often stacked against First Alaskans because it reflects the biases, stereotypes and limited knowledge of the society that created it.

We do not say this to cast blame — nor is that the purpose of the Native justice center. The facts simply are that despite best intentions and some very hard work in recent decades, prejudice persists. We encourage people to simply acknowledge the fact and know that rooting it out is an ongoing process. Our careers, families, and dreams don't develop overnight. Eliminating bias also requires long term commitment, even stamina. As well as a process, it should be a community priority.

The Native justice center will provide a means to document the serious, and often subtle, ways that Alaska Natives are short-shifted in the courtroom. Roy Huhndorf, president of Cook Inlet Region, Inc. and a prime innovator and sponsor of the justice center concept, noted in a recent interview with the Alaska Journal of Commerce some of the difficulties encountered by the Native people in the system. This includes pressure to confess crimes without the same deference to legal rights that non-Natives take for granted. Native women, Huhndorf noted, are often subjected to racism and sexism. Follow-up in support of Natives and their families victimized by crime is commonly inadequate.

With the Native population of Anchorage rising, and arrests of Natives rising disproportionately according to expert observers, formation of the justice center is timely and becoming more urgent. We feel the vigilance brought to bear by even a small watchdog organization will go a long way towards making the judicial system more sensitive and responsive to the legitimate needs and constitutional rights of Native citizens.

We call on police, attorneys, judges and other officials to view the center as a resource to help them perform their jobs more effectively — as any public servant would want to do.

The *Tundra Times* pledges its own editorial and reportorial resources to this effort in the hopes that the Alaska Native Justice Center can open as planned by the end of the year.