

HEARING ON SENATE BILL 61

State House Committee On Minority Hire Has Lively Session Here

By HOWARD ROCK
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FAIRBANKS—“An act providing an avenue for individuals with demonstrated abilities to enter into employment without educational and experience requirements; and providing for an effective date.”

So states State Senate Bill 61.

The bill got more than a little attention here last weekend, so much so that it had many of the House committee members on minority hire on the edge of their seats.

Senate Bill 61, according to Senator Edward Merdes, D-Fairbanks, who was invited to sit in at the hearing, was designed to not require minorities to read and write but to find out who could do the job even though the applicant can not pass a written test.

“There has been no persons hired under this bill,” Senator Merdes revealed. “I’d like to see the enthusiasm changed. Let’s enforce this bill.”

Many of the people who testified at the hearing pointed out that there were skilled workers among the minorities who could handle many jobs but they don’t get the jobs because they can’t pass the written test.

“If a native does not pass the written test, even though he is

able to do the job and meet all the requirements, why not hire him?” queried Tom Drake.

Drake is part Eskimo from Nome and he is the director of the Northern Correctional Institution (Fairbanks State jail). Drake also pointed out that the bill does not apply to urban areas. Others agreed with him.

“The bill does not cover metropolitan areas,” said Willie Radcliffe, a Negro. “Its intent is not being carried out. The legislature should broaden the scope of it. The bill is missing the metropolitan areas and missing the Black. We’re on the bottom of the totem pole among the minorities.”

The hearing was chaired by Rep. Ed Orbeck, D-Fairbanks, and his committee was made up of the following members:

Rep. Jess Harris, R-Anchorage, Rep. John Huber, D-Fairbanks; Rep. Joe McGill, D-Dillingham; Rep. Eugene V. Miller,

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D-Fairbanks; and Rep. Dick Randolph, R-Fairbanks.

The lively hearing went through most of the afternoon last Saturday.

"First priority in giving jobs are the Vietnam veterans," stated James O'Rourke, director of State Employment Service in Fairbanks. "Veterans come before anyone else."

He told the hearing that the applications for jobs don't show the race of the applicant. He said that when the applicants apply for jobs, they do apply by race but when the applications get to the prospective employers, they do not show race.

"However, by computers in Juneau, they can be identified by race," O'Rourke said.

He told the hearing that the current system that is being used for job applications "is perhaps the best."

Woodrow Johanson, director of the Fairbanks State Highway Department, testified that his agency recently hired 17 persons and three of the 17 were colored men.

He said that in his region, his department employs 300 people and out of the 300, ten are negroes. Twenty-five per cent of the workers are natives and two per cent Black. Statewide, there are about 1500 employees in the highway department and 11 of them are Blacks.

"I have worked for equal employment for some years," said Larry Oskolkoff, manpower specialist for the Postal Services. "In 1967, there were about 300 postal workers in Anchorage and five were minorities. Fairbanks had the same ratio, I believe."

Oskolkoff said that minority hire in this region has improved during recent years but he thought it could be improved. He said there are now 60 minority workers in Fairbanks and Anchorage postal services.

"I would like to propose," he added, "that the Governor issue an executive order that there has to be a training program, not only for the minorities but for the managers."

As the minority hire picture became clearer, Rep. John Huber remarked, "The way it looks now there should be an "A" for the Senate Bill 61, and "F" for implementation."

"I have tried for years to get minorities hired," stated Robert Willard, director of the State Human Rights Commission.

He told the hearing that the State of Alaska has no equal opportunity program; that a large number of minorities are unaware of the Senate Bill 61; that out of 7560 workers in one instance, 460 were natives.

"I don't think the State is that much interested in the minority hire problem," Willard said. ". . . I would also like to point out that there are no field offices for the Division of Personnel."

"The State," he added, "should establish an equal opportunity policy."

As did other people who testified; Grafton Gabriel said that he knew of men who can pass the jobs but not the written tests.

"Tests are most discriminatory procedures that ever existed," remarked Rep. Eugene Miller.

Emery Chapple, Commissioner of Public Safety, told the hearing that there was no lack of interest on the Governor's part in minority hire.

"We just don't get applications from the minority people," he emphasized.

Andy Miscovich told the panel that during his years of mining activities, his family hired 60 native people who met jobs in fine manner, but that when they applied for state jobs, they couldn't pass the test.

"I would like to say something about the temporary workers," Miscovich continued. "They are not treated right. When they work overtime, they don't get time and a half. I think the workers should be treated alike, temporary, seasonal and permanent."

Senator Merdes came out strongly for encouraging work applications by the minorities.

"We have to aggressively go out to the rural areas and encourage work applications from the native people," he emphasized. "The Ford Motor Co. did this and it worked."

He said the minorities just don't apply for jobs because of the history of work discrimination.

Merdes later told Tundra Times that the Senate Bill 61 "needs to be beefed up a lot."

He said he would like to see the State be more aggressive, cooperative and helpful on the minority hire.

"When you give dignity and opportunity to everybody, you are giving an opportunity for self-respect," Merdes continued.

"The Ford Motor Co. program was a modern miracle. When they were seeking applications from the minority groups, they didn't ask for the applicants' criminal record or his drinking record. When you start to interfere on a man's rights, you are walking the tight rope."

He said people who discriminate should lean over backwards to make up for that discrimination and give the minority groups a chance to develop self-respect.

"The Senate should be the first to set an example to private industry—the whole country. This is merely a practical method of giving the equal opportunity for employment considering the cultural aspects and discriminatory disadvantages of the past.

"Beautiful thing about it is that the Whites will benefit—not only the Whites but everyone else."