

A New Approach: Native Solutions for Native Problems

Alaska Natives experience some of the highest rates of accidental deaths, suicides, alcoholism, homicides, fetal alcohol syndrome and domestic violence in the nation. Alaska Natives - many of them young men - fill the state's jails at a rate exceeding 250 percent of their numbers in the general population. Native children are not obtaining adequate educations, and Alaska Natives remain on the economic fringes of one of the richest states, per capita, in the union. Just as in the times when attempted assimilation was most blatant and pronounced, the validity of the Alaska Native cultural perspective continues to be ignored.

Because the most serious problems Alaska Natives face are uniquely their own, the solutions will have to come from the Native community. Alaska Natives must be empowered to carry out the solutions.

Dealing with unresolved transgenerational grief borne of epidemics, religious persecution, and attempts at eradication of their cultures will not be easy, but Alaska Natives can deal with the issues facing them. Answers will come from their inherited strength and wisdom.

What the federal and state governments can do is offer mutual respect and assistance. They must be willing to give control of local issues back to

Alaska Natives. They must step aside in many areas so that Alaska Natives can attempt to reconstruct honorable and dignified lives for themselves.

This will not be an easy task. People who have become accustomed to living without power tend to avoid

the obligations that accompany it. Likewise, the external forces that take power - even with the best intentions - generally resist giving it back. In that regard, the following words from the works of Leo Tolstoy are appropriate to consider:

"I sit on a man's back choking him and making him carry me. Yet I assure myself and others that I am sorry for him and wish to lighten his load by all possible means - except by getting off his back."