



ASRAA offers suggestions

The executive director of the Association of Stranded Rural Alaskans in Anchorage, Kay White, offered testimony recently to a task force in Anchorage that legislators would be wise to consider in the upcoming legislative session.

White offered suggestions for long-term and immediate steps to ease the problems faced by Alaska's poor. It looks already as if 1990-91 will be a very cold winter, and legislators must immediately take a look at the fact that people cannot be allowed to freeze to death.

Generally, we're talking about people with very desperate needs. White pointed out that last year 75 percent of ASRAA's clients were referred by hospitals — patients and immediate family members brought to Anchorage for treatment not available in the villages.

One woman referred to the agency had accompanied her 78-year-old mother on a medivac flight after an accident. She had no money for food, no place to stay and no airfare to return home. Another came to Anchorage on a monthly outpatient basis. He needed a special diet and was too ill to stay in a shelter.

"Fifteen percent of ASRAA's clients are receiving outpatient medical care. Without assistance, these people, already in a medical crisis, would be homeless on the streets of Anchorage," White said in her testimony.

White also said that for every person ASRAA assists, three must be turned away. "More and more we've been told, 'There is no space, the shelter is full,'" she said.

White urged stable, predictable funding for social service agencies in Anchorage and throughout the state. She also said that supplemental funding to address the homeless crisis should be a legislative priority.

Among other goals, White urged immediate steps be taken to expand existing facilities to accommodate more families and individuals with special needs. And as a longer range goal, she suggested transitional housing for up to one year, freeing up emergency beds and making sure families not yet stabilized don't bounce from shelter to shelter.

She also pleaded for affordable low-income housing to be offered to replace the many units being torn down. Although Alaska's economy is heading up — and many people are enjoying the benefits of the improvement — those who are just barely able to scrape together rent may find it impossible if another increase goes into effect.

We urge legislators to make these recommendations among their top priorities. Colder and colder temperatures mean many Alaskans — the poor — have fewer and fewer options.