

Convention Panels Address

The health and social issues facing Alaska Natives were described on the first day of the convention by speakers on three panels. The first panel, "Facing the facts: A health and social crisis," gave a status report on Alaska Native health and social issues. The second panel, "Overview of current health and social initiatives," described current efforts that are being made throughout the state to address the issues. The final panel, "Shared Visions" provided different views on the mission statement and goals for the 1990's. Following is an excerpt from the remarks made by some of the panel members.

FACING THE FACTS: A HEALTH AND SOCIAL CRISIS

Dr. John Middaugh, DHSS Epidemiology Section

The health of Alaskans has never been better. Alaska's infant mortality rate has dropped to an all-time low and the life expectancy of an Alaskan born in 1988 has never been higher. Death rates have also fallen to an all-time low. In spite of these great improvements in overall health status, problems remain and the improvements have not occurred equally.

There is still a much higher infant mortality rate among Alaska Natives (22.5 vs 8.5 infant deaths per 1,000 live births). The death rate among Alaska Natives is still more than twice that of non-Natives (726 vs 360 deaths per 100,000 population). Although the life expectancy of Alaskans has increased, the life expectancy of Alaska Natives still remains less than non-Natives (67 vs 73 years expectancy). In 1946, tuberculosis was listed as the cause of death on 43% of all death certificates for Alaskan Natives. From 1980-1986, only 13 of 13,534 Alaskans died of TB.

Today, we face a plague due to injuries. Both nationally and in Alaska, injuries are the leading killers. In Alaska, 90% of our population is less than 50 years of age. Among Alaskans less than 50 years of age, 70% of deaths that occur are due to injuries. Injuries can be grouped into two groups: intentional and unintentional. Injuries are not accidents; most can be prevented.

From 1980-86, 34% of all deaths among Natives were caused by injuries. Intentional injuries (homicide and suicide) accounted for 11% of Alaska Native deaths.

Dr. James Berner, Indian Health Service

Alcohol is directly or indirectly responsible for a large proportion of deaths in Alaska Natives older than 1 year of age. It is also responsible for the most common recognizable cause of the Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. A 1986 study of Alaska Native children five years and younger revealed an incidence of 4.3 FAS infants for every 1,000 live births. While this is a conservative figure, it is the highest FAS incidence rate of any group thus far studied. Fetal Alcohol Syndrome is completely preventable.

Two residential alcohol treatment facilities will be available for youth with alcohol problems in the next year. These facilities will represent a large advance for youth, but will not solve the problem of alcohol and drug abuse in children. The answer to drug problems (including alcohol) lies in prevention. This is accomplished through positive parenting, providing protection for abused and/or neglected children, and through effective rural education systems.

OVERVIEW OF CURRENT HEALTH AND SOCIAL INITIATIVES

Doug Modig, RuralCap

RuralCap has a community development approach to addressing alcohol. The program is based on the mission that we are here to create a Native world unimpaired by alcohol and drug abuse. All activities that serve the mission are based on four foundation principles.

These principles were adapted from the Four Worlds Development Project and are as follows: if there is no vision, then there can be no development; individual development goes hand in hand with community development; a great learning enterprise is required; all development must come from within.

There are many actions around the state that clearly show there is a new awareness and an expanded sense of commitment to addressing alcohol and drug abuse problems. Highlights range from Akhiok, where there is 80% sobriety to Kake, where there is community dialogue between groups, youth activities, strong support groups and no suicides in 1.5 years.

In Fort Yukon, youth groups are active and seeking support from Council. John Titus's fish camp has had nearly

40 people come through it and only 3 have returned to drinking. Hoonah has used spirit camps for traditional healing. In English Bay, community sharing of workshops with drama. There are other activities occurring throughout the state.

"SHARED VISIONS"

Adjutant General John Schaeffer

You are probably wondering what I am doing up here. . . I am here because I am concerned. I was concerned before I took this job and I thought, "Oh boy, no more worries. I am getting away from all these problems that NANA had and I don't have to worry about them anymore."

Well, unfortunately most of the young men who are in the National Guard are from your villages and they are 18 to 25 years old. And, just because they put a uniform on doesn't make them any less susceptible to the problems because they don't wear their uniforms that often. We hope that by putting them in uniform we help them. We give them an opportunity to do worthwhile jobs and they feel good about that and we pay them for it. And, it does help. But, we also give them the money they need to go buy booze and dope. And, we give them opportunities to go buy it. We don't try to do that, but that's what happens. So, we are very concerned about the problems that you are facing.

We are talking about a vision. We've got a theme over here for this conference, "We are Sovereign." I think that should be our vision. It shouldn't be the theme for this conference, although it is a good way to look at it because it's going to take us awhile to get there. As sick as we are, there is no way we can run our own affairs. If we had any power at all, we wouldn't know how to use it. And, I think we have already shown that. Not totally, of course not.

Not everybody has problems, right? Most of us in here are in pretty good shape. I don't know where all these drunks are that we are talking about. They sure aren't here. It's not my family that has problems - must be those other guys. I think that is really the thing we have to do. It's hard to have a vision - it's hard to look at solutions unless you first admit where you're at. And, we are just not ready to do that - not all of us. Some of you are - these villages that

they are talking about that are working towards solutions - people, organizations that are working towards solutions - there is a lot more of them and I think we are making some headway. But, we are not going to solve anything until we recognize where we are.

How many of you are alcoholics sitting in here? Not the kind we used to think were the alcoholics - the guys that never went home and drank everyday. The other kind of alcoholics that most of us are. We get a drink and we can't stop, or we can't stop until we have too much. We look at where we are going to have conventions and how often we are going to have them so that we can get away from our dry villages and go some place where we can have a drink. How much of our lives are ruled by those kinds of things? How many of you are like that? Well, I am. I've always been that way. And that's what makes me just like the rest of you. And, I feel comfortable with all the rest of you alcoholics.

But I think it is time we admitted it and did something about it. Now, does that mean I'm not ever going to have another drink for the rest of my life? No, I quit drinking several months ago and I've already fallen off the wagon twice. It's not easy. But you've gotta start somewhere. And, I figured that even though I may have a few drinks sometime during the rest of my life, it doesn't make any difference because I have made a commitment to be as sober as much as I can. Is that 100 percent? Probably not. But, it is better than where I was before where my commitment was to not staying sober. And, I think that is where we've all gotta start.

I'm not asking you to go and quit drinking all of a sudden. But, I think what we have gotta do is take this trend we have started here - or some people have started - with sobriety and bring it over that mark where the healing starts. I don't know what that is - 40 percent of the Natives, 50, 60 percent. Maybe it takes 80 percent before the healing starts in some cases. Who cares!

If there is enough of us, I think that is where it is going to work. And, that is what we have to do because this is something - this business to make it work - it's something like pregnancy. You can't be part pregnant. In order to do something here, we have got to commit to it.

Does that mean that you can't ever have a drink again? No, I don't think so. We've got to decide that we are going to help heal ourselves. And that means that we have got to be more sober than we are drunk. We won't solve it all, but we'll start helping and I think that will help the healing process.

As one of the doctors said, this is just the symptoms. The booze is just the symptoms, it's not the problem. But before we can get to the real problems that cause us to be so terrible at drinking and the way we treat ourselves from alcohol - we gotta stop that because you can't see well enough - you can't think well enough - to try and solve those real problems until you solve the alcohol problem. It's not worth it - that is why all these programs fail - because they can't get past the alcohol to where you can start looking at the real problems and start solving those.

So, we gotta start there. And that's what we have to do, all of us. And, I'm going to try - the best I can. My Guard people have already been told they are going to get involved in their villages and their regions with solving the problems - because we are part of the problem - and we want to be part of the solution. Thank you.



DELLA KEAT'S "HEALING HANDS" AWARD - Hazel and Tommy Snyder of Noorvik. Their efforts contribute to the continuation of the tribal doctor program. "Our hands are always open when the villages ask us to go," says Hazel. Photo by Rob Stapleton/AFN