

Elders Address Alcohol and Drug Abuse

Elders who attended the 10th Annual AFN Elders Conference focused attention on how their communities are addressing alcohol and drug abuse problems. The theme of the day-long conference held Oct. 17 in Fairbanks was "Making a Difference".

Alfred Wells, Sr. of the NANA region and Nina Olsen of Kodiak opened the conference by describing efforts that are being made in their respective regions.

Wells, 66, began by talking about Inupiat Ilitqusiat, a spirit program that was started seven years ago to keep Inupiaq language, culture and values alive. He emphasized that in order to deal with problems it is important to learn about family and cultural traditions to help foster positive self-esteem.

The NANA Region Elder's Council, Wells said, is giving formal recognition to those who have worked hard to combat alcohol and drug abuse and is also sending non-confronting letters to dealers, which he described as effective. A reward system for turning in bootleggers is also working well, he said.

In dealing with youth, Wells said that scoldings or scare tactics aren't the solution. Instead, he advocates positive role models and early awareness programs in the schools.

Last year, the elders endorsed a resolution to ban the sale of alcohol in Kotzebue, which is the regional hub for 10 other villages. Since the community

stopped selling alcohol last January, Wells said that crime rates have declined and that there is a peacefulness in the region that hasn't been seen in a long time. (Kotzebue residents voted again on Dec. 6 to keep Kotzebue damp.)

Nina Olsen of Kodiak, 64, works for Wings, one of the few treatment programs in the state which serves youth up to age 18. She says that the more she learns about alcoholism and drugs, the more committed she is to breaking the cycle.

Olsen has raised eight children with her husband and serves as a grandmother figure to many youth. She volunteers her time to visit people at the substance abuse center and the hospital.

Olsen is also active in supporting Natives for Sobriety, a support group similar to Alcoholics Anonymous. She said that Natives express themselves better in their own group and encouraged other communities to consider starting similar groups.

Following the speeches by Wells and Olsen, the elders broke into small groups to discuss other ideas. The discussions ranged from support for summer youth programs to encouraging the formation of sobriety support groups in villages.

From the discussion groups, three resolutions were drafted for introduction at the AFN convention. The resolutions included: 88-27, requesting funding to allow elder groups to show "The Honor



Elders from the NANA region take a break during AFN's 10th annual Elder's Conference. Photo by Pamela Cravez/Senior Voice

of All" to their communities as a way to assist in creating sobriety; 88-28, urging elders to report bootleggers and to work with local leadership to develop plans to combat alcohol abuse; and 88-29, requesting funding support for joint youth and elder education programs aimed at teaching cultural values. A number of other resolutions were also offered by regional elders groups.

While each of the solutions recommended by the elders address various aspects of the alcohol and drug abuse problem, together they make a powerful statement: each person can make a difference. And, while the individual changes may seem small, together, they are changing our communities for the better.