

ANHB holds 'mega-meeting' in Barrow

Discussions with lieutenant governor candidate Willie Hensley, Health and Social Services Commissioner Myra Munson and Alaska Area Native Health Service Deputy Director Ward Hurlburt were highlights of a recent "mega-meeting" of the Alaska Native Health Board.

The 12-member ANHB met last month at the Arctic Slope Regional Corp. offices in Barrow to review current and future projects and discuss upcoming changes in state administration and the impact of federal budget negotiations of Alaska Native health issues.

In a special meeting Sept. 26, Hensley, Democratic candidate, pledged his commitment to ANHB and the Association of Regional Health Directors to involve them in the transition from the Cowper to the Knowles administration should he and Tony Knowles be elected to office in November.

The Knowles/Hensley campaign had earlier released position papers on Alaska's health care needs and alcohol/drug abuse, in which the candidates expressed their support for such concepts as a comprehensive state health plan, prevention as policy, expanding the Community Health Aide Program for rural Alaska and better access to drug treatment for pregnant women.

In an earlier meeting, Munson reported that the transition in her department following the departure of the Cowper administration should be fairly smooth. She stated that although she does not anticipate remaining in her post under the new administration, she would consider it if asked.

Munson provided a recap of DHSS accomplishments during her tenure with the Cowper administration, including the Village/State Indian Child Welfare Act agreement now nearing completion, the increased focus on healthy babies and children, and improved communication and coordination among divisions within the department.

In discussing the high cost of health care in Alaska, Munson suggested that Alaskans should adopt a view of Medicaid as a governmentally supported insurance program rather than a form of welfare.

She recommended that all patients be screened for Medicaid eligibility and enrolled if eligible even if they do not want the cash benefits. In this way, the health insurance benefits would be in place should they be needed.

Munson described health concerns which she hopes ANHB will address over the next few years. The top three health issues for Alaska Natives, in her opinion, are injury prevention, a reduction in cancer rates and a reduction in teen pregnancy.

At the federal level, ANHB is concerned about plans for the Indian Health Service budget to be reduced by as much as \$50 million in Fiscal Year 1991, as part of a federal budget sequestration.

The Alaska Area Native Health Service would see a \$7 million decrease if sequestration takes effect.

However, Hurlburt told ANHB that he is optimistic the IHS budget will not be cut drastically and may even be increased. Both President Bush's version of the FY 1991 budget and that of the House propose increases for IHS.

Recent recommendations by the Senate Select Committee on Indian Affairs and Secretary of Interior Manuel Lujan for significant increases in federal spending for Indian programs are another cause for optimism.

Replacement of the Alaska Native Medical Center facility in Anchorage

was another topic of discussion at the Barrow meeting. A design known as the "village concept" has been approved for the new building.

The Cultural Design Committee, formed to ensure participation by Natives in the design process, had considerable input into the winning design.

Ground-breaking for the ANMC replacement project is expected in late 1992.

Kotzebue is also looking forward to a new hospital, but planners must first solve a debate over whether pilings are needed under the structure to prevent problems with permafrost. The Kotzebue facility is scheduled for completion in November 1993.

Other highlights of the ANHB Barrow meeting were:

- Discussion of the patient travel survey currently conducted by ANHB to present Congress with accurate data on the problem of access to care in Alaska.

- A report on the P.L. 93-638 development process. Lloyd Miller of the law firm Sonosky, Chambers,

Sachse and Miller stated that it will likely be another nine months before the regulations are finalized and fully implemented.

- A report by Hurlburt and ANHB Executive Director Anne Walker on the accomplishments of work groups formed as part of the Quality Management Initiative established to improve management of the Indian Health Service.

- Discussion of the need for ANHB's State Legislative Committee to develop recommendations for educating the new governor and legislators on Native/rural health care priorities and problems.

- Nomination of Robert Clark to serve on the Joint Federal/State Commission on Policies and Programs Affecting Alaska Natives. Clark is on sabbatical leave from his duties as executive director of the Bristol Bay Area Health Corp.

- Agreement for ANHB to serve as a pass-through for \$30,000 aimed at developing a model for improved health services for pre-school children in rural areas.

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• Cynthia Young, health director for the North Slope Borough Department of Health and Social Services, was presented with the first Alaska Area Director's Award for Excellence.

• Bonnie Gabaldon, deputy director for ANHB, was also recognized for 10 years of service to the board and Alaska Natives.