

# ASRAA offers a helping hand to rural Alaskans

by Warren Jarvis  
for the Tundra Times

You are a white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant. You are happy, well-adjusted and very comfortable in the middle-class existence you have carved out in society. You were born and raised in a typical mid-American city and are imbued with the values and behaviors which have been the mainstream of your culture and tradition for many years.

Suddenly, for whatever reason, you find yourself marooned on a small island of humanity; stranded in a small Alaska Native village of perhaps 200 people.

What do you do?

For the people at the Association for Stranded Rural Alaskans in Anchorage, such a scenario would be in many ways poetic justice.

Since the agency's founding in June 1981, ASRAA has helped more than 11,000 people who were having difficulty dealing with the culture of an American city.

"There are ways of doing things (in the city) that are just totally foreign to people from a rural Alaskan setting," said Velma Schaffner, a community services specialist for ASRAA. "In rural Alaska, the communities are kind of like extended families, to help each

cross-cultural seminars for other agencies.

A major part of ASRAA's work, however, is not in helping those who wish to stay, but in facilitating the return of people to their homes.

Since July, Schaffner said, the Indian Health Service quit funding patients from the Bush.

One of the results of this, she said, is more people who either cannot afford the travel from their homes to Anchorage for medical treatment or do not understand the complexities involved and do not bring enough money to return home.

Overall, Schaffner said, ASRAA provides a variety of services for those who qualify. Included among these are transportation — bus fare whenever possible — within the city for court appearances or job interviews, transportation to the airport for a flight home, intercession with other agencies, and arranging for a place to stay at one of the city's shelters.

Not everyone, of course, agrees with such a program, especially in a time of shrinking government revenues and tightening budgets.

According to Schaffner, the deep cuts the agency has taken in the past couple of years have severely limited ASRAA's ability to educate the villages.

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This, Schaffner said, is what makes the agency needed; among all the agencies that make up Anchorage's United Way agencies, only this one is specifically directed at the needs of people "stranded" in a strange culture.

A "stranded rural Alaskan" Schaffner said, is basically anyone who resides outside of Anchorage, who is an Alaska resident, and is accidently stuck in Anchorage without the resources to return home.

To qualify for aid, the person must also have no other resources, such as family or available funds, with which they could help themselves. Information on how to live in Anchorage, however, is free to anyone.

According to Schaffner, this encompasses more than people who just lose their money. Because many rural Alaskans have no real understanding of how a city works, Schaffner said, they may well arrive unprepared for a stay of any length.

"A lot of people come to town thinking they're going to find work, and they don't know how to," Schaffner said. "Also, the survival skills are totally different. . . when you live in an urban setting, you just can't go next door and say, I need this."

To help alleviate this problem, ASRAA teaches survival skills to those who will remain in Anchorage for some time, as well as holding

From a budget high of roughly \$300,000 three years ago, the agency's budget for this year is only half that. Reflecting this, the ASRAA staff has fallen from six to its present three full-time and no part-time employees.

"Everything's been cut," Schaffner said, "from supplies to personnel."

Despite previous efforts, however, as well as the dissemination of information by people as they return to their villages, the need — based on the number of people asking for help over any given time period — has not fallen appreciably.

Schaffner speculated that part of the recent need has probably been a result of the spring oil spill disrupting the subsistence economy and tempting people from their homes in search of high-paying cleanup jobs.

At the moment, Schaffner said, ASRAA is handling about 130 contacts a month. Of those who call for help, about 90 percent are Native.

ASRAA makes no distinctions by race, Schaffner said, but will help all who qualify.

Whether a small agency like ASRAA, with its small and specialized client base, can weather slimmer years ahead is uncertain. No matter what happens in that future, however, to many people ASRAA's efforts will have had a lasting impact on their lives.