

Meeting Basic Social Needs

Situations and Recommendations

Note: The Tundra Times is reprinting the Alaska Natives Commission Report over the next several months.

The Situation

Native people are the children and grandchildren of those who survived mass death brought on by famine and disease. Descended from those who withstood attempts at cultural annihilation at the hands of governments, many Alaska Natives seem to carry symptoms they inherited and learned from their parents and grandparents - the survivors.

Not only did human beings die in great numbers from the forces of Western Civilization, but the holes left in society by mass deaths meant the loss of the rich spirituality and cultural traditions at the center of Alaska Natives' world view. It appears that the way survivors learned to cope was to look away from the devastation and the problems and to remain silent about their feelings. But the problems remain, persisting against the will of those who wish to forget and against the hundreds of millions of dollars in public resources spent annually to alleviate them.

What is seen in village Alaska today are the tattered remains of traditional societies and cultures mixed in with confusing, marginally accepted Western social, governmental, educational and legal structures. Alcohol, used as medication for the soul, has served as an inexorable wedge, blunting individuals' feelings and erasing spiritual and cultural values.

Healing and recovery will be brought about only when Native people, their families and their governments assume responsibility for the total health and welfare of the villages. Among the first issues that must be confronted are violence against self and others, disregard for roles as family and tribal members, and alcohol abuse.

Current methods of dealing with Native problems and circumstances are simply not working. The situation continues to spin out of control, and only Natives can come up with operable solutions. They must be empowered to do so.

Recommendations

1. *The federal and state governments should implement policies - in the form of appropriate legislation, if needed, regulations and operating*

procedures - that give maximum local powers and jurisdiction to tribes and tribal courts in the areas of alcohol importation and control, community and domestic relations, and law enforcement. If this cannot be achieved under current federal and state statutes or because of rigid interpretations of the Alaska State Constitution, Congress should amend Public Law 83-280 to specify all tribes in Alaska have concurrent criminal jurisdiction with the State of Alaska, similar to the jurisdiction now exercised by the Metlakatla Community Council.

Discussion

The constant rise in alcohol-related criminality in the Native community, together with steady increases in other key indicators of social pathology directly related to alcohol abuse, is clear proof that current methods of controlling alcohol's destruction are simply not working. For over a century governments (federal, territorial and, later, the State of Alaska) have attempted policies and regulatory schemes for controlling alcohol use and abuse by Alaska Natives. Everything from outright prohibition of alcohol sales to Natives, to present-day attempts at curbing alcohol importation and use under the State's "local option laws," have been tried. (Conn and Moras 1986). No alternative, or combination of alternatives, has proven even nominally effective. The situation continues to spiral out of control.

A broad expansion of regulatory and judicial authority could eventually bring a measure of peace to Native homes and villages. Lives might ultimately be saved, and the number of victims, most of whom are women and children, will decrease. All too often, State Troopers arrive only after someone has been killed or a serious, alcohol-induced crime has been committed. Problems need to be addressed before they escalate to the point where significant harm has been done and the situation is beyond immediate resolution.

For tribal councils and village people, expansion of powers and authorities would mean regaining inherent responsibility for village problem-solving in an area where grief and turmoil are the most pronounced. It

would mark the beginning of the end of being wholly dependent on State law enforcement and judicial agencies to protect Native families and lives.

2. *The federal government and the State of Alaska should institute a moratorium on development of new non-Native agency programs that deal with the problems of alcohol and inhalant abuse, domestic violence, sexual, suicide and other social pathologies in predominantly Native areas of the state. Included in such a moratorium would be studies, seminars, conferences and other agency initiative now in place or in the planning stages that have not been originated from Alaska Native villages or organizations.*

Discussion

A moratorium on spending until such time as Alaska Natives themselves come up with proposals to replace existing programs would wipe the slate clean of ineffective programs. At the same time, it would afford Alaska Natives the opportunity to design grassroots initiatives that take into account local knowledge, experience and expertise. Initiatives are needed that address the myriad, complex and interrelated problems found in the Alaska Native community. Alaska Natives - who live with those problems and their ramifications daily - are the ones most likely to devise sensible and appropriate solutions.

At the same time, no effective, long-term change can happen until Alaska Natives possess the responsibility for solutions and a commitment to the continued well-being of individuals, families and communities. This will never happen unless government, in a serious and meaningful way, loosen its grasp.

3. *Alaska Native villages, with assistance from their organizations (see Recommendation #4, below), should establish plans for beginning a healing and recovery process for their families and communities. Native organizations not locally based, and federal and state agencies should not initiate any new social programs in a village without the village taking the initial step to plan for its recovery.*

Discussion

Existing social programs being run

by the state and federal governments are not working in spite of the sizable outlay of funds and human resources. This recommendation is based on the premise that only the Native people can solve their own human problems. Governments cannot do it for them because these are Native problems and it must be Natives who learn to deal with them.

In the long-run, financial savings for governments will likely be realized in proportion to the decrease in need for government social and behavioral health programs. As it is, governments spend hundreds of millions of dollars each year on emergency health care, public safety, corrections and social services for Alaska Natives. Over time, healthier communities should ultimately translate into significant savings to the public.

4. *Federal and state appropriations for social programs in predominantly Native areas of the state should bypass governmental agencies and be redirected as grants to Alaska Native villages and village consortia that have developed, or are developing, projects aimed at lessening substance abuse, social pathologies, violence and criminality in the villages.*

Discussion

When faced with dilemmas such as health issues, educational concerns,

law and order or social service needs, people in the villages no longer turn to themselves for solutions. Instead, they call the nearest agency head or social worker, or travel to Juneau or Washington, D.C., for relief. Government employees who have, at best, marginal understanding of Native people, end up as ill-equipped surrogates hoping for solutions. Under this arrangement, villagers are robbed of the opportunity to discuss local problems and to come up with answers best suited to their own circumstances and the way they view the world. Village-based initiatives are few and far between.

With the assistance of their own organizations (e.g. Native regional non-profits, regional health corporations, among others), village councils and consortia of villages need programs that are conceived, developed and controlled at the local level. The only criteria for funding such projects should be: 1) a village or group of villages have, by vote of the community, admitted to having the problems they seek to address; 2) villages and/or Native organizations are able to manage programs and account for program funds; and 3) the applicant village(s) has agreed to participate fully in the project from the planning to implementation stages.