

BIA, state, tribes draft agreement on General Assistance

A group of administrators from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the state of Alaska and tribal organizations met recently in Juneau to draft a BIA/state agreement for the recently reinstated General Assistance Program, according to Cook Inlet Tribal Council officials.

The agreement draft focuses on averting possible conflicts in administering the program as well as describing how the federally and state funded program services will complement one another.

According to CITC, the tribal contractor for the Cook Inlet region, both the BIA and state agree that Alaska Natives and Native Americans will remain eligible for all state public assistance programs on the same basis as other citizens of the state.

Any differences in the interpretation of regulations arising between the Division of Public Assistance and the bureau will not delay the timely provision of services to eligible clients, according to CITC.

Representing CITC at the work group was senior planner Leroy Bingham.

"Actual administration of the program may or may not remain with BIA, as there are still unresolved issues on national, state and local levels," Bingham said.

"The big issue right now is whether there are any available funds to administer the program," he said. "We will apply to operate general assistance for this area, but if funding is not available for additional staff to manage the caseloads, it will be impossible for us to take it on, and the BIA will have to operate it."

Tribal grantees at the meeting discovered they have a choice and may choose not to apply for the program. Whether a decision of this nature will affect existing funding already in place for social services has not been determined.

Bingham said he would advise tribal contractors, especially the smaller organizations, to be aware of the accountability that comes with a program of this size.

It is estimated the new program will serve anywhere from 800 to 1,200 people in the Anchorage area during the course of a year, depending on need and eligibility.

According to CITC, tribal contractors can expect to receive grant notice applications sometime in January.