

State Department of Labor Has Monumental Job Finding Jobs

(Special to TUNDRA TIMES)

JUNEAU— Alaska's Department of Labor is committed to a job which Solomon himself might find difficult to fill. The department, among other chores, is charged by statute with responsibility for finding jobs for Alaska's 107,000 workers and for keeping them reasonably contented in their work.

Commissioner of Labor Thomas J. Moore, who heads the statewide organization, admits he has a tough assignment, but he claims the work has its lighter moments and its rewards.

Moore said one of the biggest jobs the department has to face, month in and month out, is a high unemployment rate. Currently, about 10 percent of the state's work force is unemployed, at least part of the time.

Moore attributes the high unemployment rate, which is three times the national average, to three factors: A growing influx of unskilled outsiders, the seasonal nature of many jobs in Alaska, and a high incidence of untrained and unskilled labor.

Commissioner Moore pointed out that the unemployment rate for Alaskan labor only partially points out the unemployment problem. Moore stated that, "The 10-percent-plus unemployment rate only depicts those in covered employment —those

whose earnings are reported for unemployment insurance payments. This does not accurately depict the unemployment among Alaska's native population, many of whom have never formally been in the labor market but have engaged in a subsistence economy."

What is Alaska's Department of Labor doing about the unemployment problem? What are some of the long-range plans?

Moore said the Department of Labor is doing several things to soften the problem. He cited a few of them.

"The problem of providing assistance to the great number of Alaskans who have been largely deprived of equal opportunities in employment, education and training is one which has been with us for a long time," he said.

"The Alaska State Employment Service of the Employment Security Division has made consistent attempts over the years to obtain financial support in its budget requests to provide adequately for a realistic manpower service, but the federal Bureau of Employment Security has given only sporadic recognition to our program. But we are continuing to work at the problem.

"Our State Employment Service has made some modest gains in outreach programs for many of our natives in rural Alaska through selection and referral to the federal Manpower Development Training Act (MDTA) project for skill-training opportunities. This program is being expanded all over the state.

"Recently, a building was completed in Bethel to house our "outreach" service in that area. The office is staffed by Mr. Robert Nick, who has made considerable progress in finding jobs for local people in the shellfish industry. A similar building is in the process in the Glennallen area, and we hope to staff that office in the next 30 days.

"Staff members from our Fairbanks, Juneau and Anchorage offices are now making regular trips to outlying com-

munities to counsel with the unemployed. We are giving particular attention to unemployed natives.

"We would like to see indigenous representatives outstationed in other key rural areas, such as Dillingham, Kotzebue and Barrow, but we have not been successful in getting federal financing for such plans, or in meeting the U. S. Department of Labor formula for establishing full-time employment offices in such rural labor markets."

Moore said he is optimistic about the plans of the newly created Rural Manpower Service of the U. S. Department of Labor. The service was put into initial operation in July; its main purpose is to find permanent employment for unemployed rural workers. The service will work closely with the Alaska State Employment Service and other state and federal agencies.

Moore said he thinks Alaska residents (those who have lived in the state for at least one year) should be given preference, if qualified, in job placement. He also said he believes Alaska will have to bear a high rate of unemployment until the area is further developed.

"We are doing everything we can to find good-paying jobs for our unemployed people, but we are not magicians," Moore said. "Let's face it. We have more unemployed people right now than we have jobs to offer. Hopefully, we will one day soon reach a happy medium. The fast-developing oil strike on the Arctic Slope may solve many of our problems in unemployment, but there, too, we must convince the industry to hire Alaskans — especially Alaskan natives—and stem the importation of outside labor."