

# Corrections official determined to reduce Native repeat offenders

by Tricia King

Special to the *Tundra Times*

Alaska's Native people are among the most imprisoned peoples in the world, according to Jerry Ward, director of Native Affairs for the Alaska Dept. of Corrections.

Speaking to a group of inmates and visitors gathered recently for a traditional potlatch at the Hiland Mountain Correctional Center in Eagle River, Ward said that the U.S. imprisons more of its citizens than any other country; Alaska imprisons more than any other state, and of 2,500 people currently incarcerated in Alaskan prisons, 1,009, or 40 percent, are Alaska Natives.

"We have to give these people hope," Ward said in an interview with the *Tundra Times*, noting that current statistics show an 80 percent of Alaskan Native inmates are repeat offenders. "Let's get that 800 not coming back."

Ward lays much of the blame for current high rates of Native imprisonment on the use of alcohol and drugs. "If our great-grandfathers would have known what this was going to cause on our society, they would have killed the first people that brought it into our country, instead of having a

drink," Ward said. "It's destroying all of our families."

Ward says that other factors contributing to the high incarceration rate of Natives include lack of money to hire good lawyers, difficulties understanding the language used by the legal system and probation rules that now require released prisoners to stay in An-

bation people are. You stay in Fairbanks on Second Avenue or Anchorage on Fourth Avenue, you're going to come back here. That's what's going on and it's not good."

Ward says his mission as the highest ranking Alaska Native in the corrections department is to reduce the number of Alaska Na-

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chorage or Fairbanks rather than return to their villages.

"True rehabilitation is one thing," Ward said. "A person has to be accepted back as a worthwhile human being by elders and the community. The system says they've got to stay where the pro-

tives returning to jail. He plans several programs designed to give a sense of hope and self-worth to Native inmates. Among these is Operation Hope, a program which offers an alternative to traditional jail time by allowing prisoners

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# Jerry Ward comments . . .

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who earn the right to serve time as farm workers or reindeer herders on one of four farms repossessed from the Point MacKenzie agricultural project across Knik Arm from Anchorage.

"There's no barbed wire, no fences whatsoever. You have to earn the right to go there," Ward said. "You work a minimum of 12 hours a day, seven days a week. And it's hard work, but there's nobody in here would not trade in a minute to go there. Because you're outdoors, you're back in touch with the earth. You're human again."

Other programs being developed as rehabilitation alternatives include a jade mine near Kotzebue,

where Native prisoners will learn to process jade, and a program where villagers will harvest sheefish to be processed by prisoners.

"We want to start developing the renewable and non-renewable resources in prison industries that fit Alaskans. That's reindeer, minerals, timber, carving," Ward said. He is also enthusiastic about training prisoners as counselors to serve as living examples to their home communities of avoiding the path of alcohol, drugs and imprisonment. "We're going to spend \$100 a day to keep somebody in jail. I'd rather pay him \$35 to be a counselor and stay sober."

The Dept. of Corrections, under the sponsorship of the Alaska

Federation of Natives, is also beginning a program which will unify the Native culture clubs from the state's 13 correctional facilities. This effort began with an initial meeting last summer between the 13 regional Native corporation presidents and inmates from the Lemon Creek correctional facility in Juneau. Future plans include quarterly meetings of the chiefs of the Native culture clubs and annual meetings between chiefs and regional corporation presidents. Action agendas will be created which, according to Ward, are expected to include legislative proposals to improve prison conditions and address other Native issues statewide.