

# Fairbanks Alcohol Rehabilitation Center Battles Alcoholism

Alaska has a drinking problem. In Fairbanks, a doctor at a Native health clinic estimates a full third of his hospital admissions and cases were alcohol related. He estimated another third have an alcohol factor.

These figures are comparable for the white community. What is being done?

In Fairbanks, the Alcohol Rehabilitation Center is working to stop men from drinking. Begun in 1967, the Center is the only such facility in the state of Alaska, serving over 50 communities in the vast state.

Its facilities, which occupy a large white frame building at 1020 Second Avenue, in Fairbanks, can house as many as 32 men for long term help in conquering their problems with drinking.

The rehabilitation center is run and supported by COM-PASS, a group of five churches which sponsors many non-profit organizations in Alaska.

Bob Carroll, executive director of the center, started the facility in 1967 to provide alcoholics with a place to seek help in stopping the drinking habit. It is his response to the pressing need for one center which would combine social, psychological, and medical facilities—a boarding home which could be more than a place a man could go to recover from a drunk.

All of the Rehabilitation Center's counselors are alcoholics—but alcoholics who have not taken a drink since they entered the center.

Charlie Biederman, Head Counselor of the center, came there in 1968 from his home town of Eagle, after having been an alcoholic for 32 years. Three years later, he has not had a drink and is responsible for the day to day operation of the center.

"Doctors will tell you there's no cure for alcoholism," Mr. Biederman explained, "but you can show an alcoholic there are people who care. It gives him something to work for. A lot of them will never quit, but you can see improvement—drinking sprees that are less frequent and less lengthy as time passes."

Due to the funding of the center, over 90 per cent of its residents are Alaskan Natives. The Bureau of Indian Affairs will pay for 20 out of the 32 beds in the center for Natives at any one time, sometimes as high as twenty-three.

The center cannot afford to admit men who cannot pay for their room and board, or have it funded.

Occasionally, such agencies as the State Department of Welfare or the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation will fund beds in the Center.

If a resident can pay his support, he pays \$250 per month. Residents who are working are expected to contribute \$25 per week to the center, to be used for emergency and recreation money for those without funds.

The program offered at the Fairbanks Alcohol Rehabilitation center has many facets. Residents are sent to the center through the BIA, doctors, the court system and other agencies.

Men who face trial for alcohol related offenses are often given the opportunity to go to the rehabilitation center for treat-

ment.

At the center, any man who is admitted must agree to stay at least ninety days.

"When a man comes in, we first see if he needs medical help, get him to a doctor," Mr. Biederman explained. "Then the regimen of the center includes finding work for as many men as possible, getting others into job training programs, University or high school programs if they are qualified."

"The main problem is to help the guys get jobs," he explained, "anything to keep them from thinking about drinking." The center cooperates closely with the state employment agency as a source of personnel. Each new resident must file with the employment agencies, who call the center when job openings are available.

Residents at the center can participate in a voluntary Antabuse program. Antabuse is a drug which will not stop a man from drinking, but will make him wish he could die if he does take a drink. It is a rare man who will continue drinking through the drug reaction.

Dr. Ted Drahn, a psychologist from the University of Alaska, runs two group therapy sessions per week, working with the men to find the problems which led to their drinking.

A BIA social worker, Ed Nicely, spends about eight hours per week at the center as well. He interviews each resident, looking for the problem that may cause each to drink—whether it is a job, home life or whatever.

"Sometimes it's as simple as finding a man the right job," Biederman said. "This may help stop drinking."

The reasons people drink, have drinking problems and become alcoholics vary, and no person has all the answers.

Does the center have successes? Do the men who come there for help eventually stop drinking?

"Some never will," said Charlie Biederman, one who has. "If you can keep them sober in here, however, it's better than letting them starve out on the streets or rot in jail."

Most nights, there is an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting at the center or elsewhere in Fairbanks. In the large recreation room on the ground floor of the Center building, a T.V. set and pool table are available for recreation.

Meals are served three times a day and coffee and sandwiches are always available. On many days, the recreation room entertains many guests, but outside recreational opportunities are scarce.

Biederman has wanted for a long time to request funds from the Alaskan Federation of Natives—several thousand dollars per year to be used for recreation, transportation, movie admissions, emergency funds and other activities to fill the men's time, when they are not working.

He is looking for alternatives for the residents to the local bar, one of the few sources of amusement in Fairbanks.

Meanwhile, the center treats over 40 men; residents and "out-patients" trying to give men alternatives for their lives to alcohol.