

# State to restructure public assistance

by Sen. John Binkley  
for the Tundra Times

JUNEAU — More than one out of every 10 Alaskans lives below the federal poverty level.

To help those in need, the state provides some form of public assistance to nearly 50,000 Alaskans, many of them in rural parts of the state where unemployment — and the cost of living — is the highest.

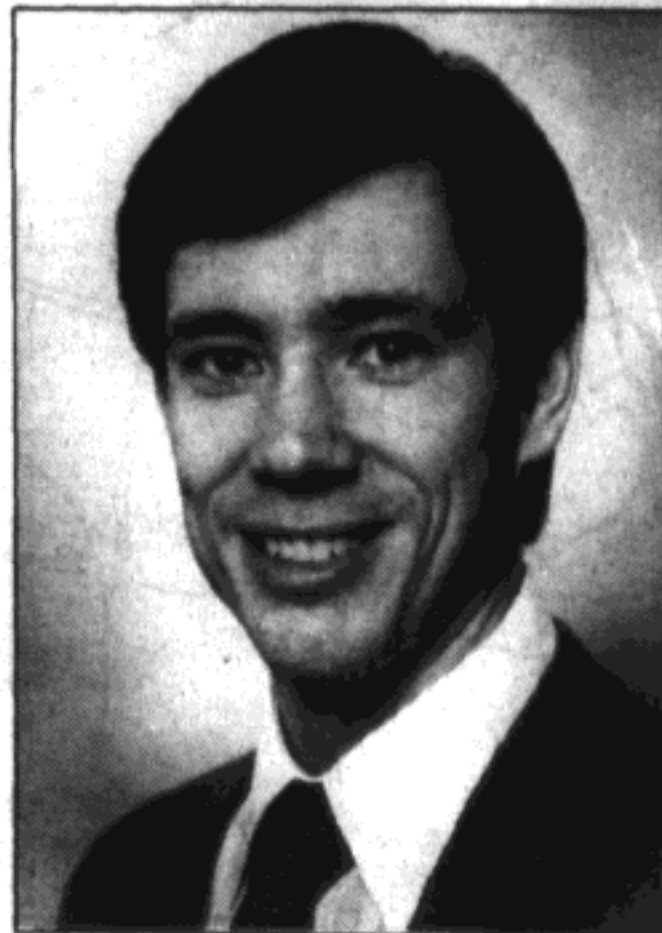
## OPINION

However, sweeping changes in the state's welfare and public assistance programs are in the works, and rural Alaskans will be among those most affected by them.

These changes are the direct result of the Family Support Act passed by Congress last year as a reform of the national welfare laws. The major goal of that legislation is to change the current system of income maintenance into a system that can help welfare recipients become self-reliant, and in doing so, strengthen the family unit.

The federal law is extremely complicated — and gives the state a lot of options in how to implement these changes. The pricetag for these changes is not cheap — next year's costs alone are estimated at \$10 million. For that reason, the Legislature and the administration put together the Family Support Task Force to develop a recommended state strategy.

That task force, made up of six legislators and five commissioners, has been working all summer researching the options and developing



an Alaska system. They've tried to get as much public input as possible by including more than 50 public members in smaller working groups.

This group will soon be ready to take their plan to the public for hearings across the state. Since it affects rural Alaskans so greatly, it's very important that everyone know what the changes might be and how they will affect them.

Some of the major provisions and issues raised include:

- A new education, training and employment program called JOBS for recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children in order to aid them in becoming self-sufficient.

Many folks are concerned about these welfare-to-work requirements because of the few job opportunities available in rural Alaska. However, nonprofit corporations such as the Tanana Chiefs Conference and the Association of Village Council

Presidents will contract directly with federal agencies to provide services tailored to meet the needs of each rural region.

Another concern of rural residents has been the needs of parents who are substance abusers. Job training alone isn't enough to get these parents independent, yet effective drug and alcohol treatment programs are not available in every place where needed.

For the first time, long-term education will be allowed under these programs. Child care must be provided to every parent in an approved program.

- The extension of child care and medical benefits for up to a year for those leaving welfare and newly entering the work force.

Often the cost of child care and worries about unnecessary medical expenses prohibit many people from going back to school or taking a job at a starting wage. It doesn't seem to pay for these parents to try to get off welfare.

That's why the new law requires the state to guarantee child care not just for those getting education or training, but also for those just starting work.

"Who" provides that care is a major issue. The federal daycare programs don't require a daycare provider be licensed, but the state program does.

Since many Alaskans would rather see their children cared for by grandparents or other family members who wouldn't necessarily be licensed, the state is looking at a provision allowing "authorized" daycare providers to be included in this option.

By extending medical benefits, Alaska Natives for the first time will

have a choice of whether to have health care under the Indian Health Service or the state's Medicaid program. No one really knows yet how this will work, or how many will take advantage of this option.

- A new program which allows families with two parents to receive benefits.

Now only single parents can receive Aid to Families with Dependent Children. Allowing two-parent families to qualify will have a big impact in rural parts of the state, since job opportunities are so scarce.

States do have the option of requiring at least one of the parents to participate in the education and training programs or some other form of work program for at least 16 hours a week — especially if their children are older than 3 years of age.

States also have the option to require teen-age parents to live at home in order to receive AFDC. They also can require teen-agers to work toward a high school diploma in order to continue receiving benefits.

- Tougher child support enforcement measures. These changes are based on the conviction that parents have an obligation to support their children.

You can see that these changes are major ones. AFN's "A Call to Action" recently documented how being on public assistance for a long time can undermine a person's self-esteem. Certainly, anything we can do to promote self-sufficiency is a good idea.

If you would like more information on these issues, you can call or write me at P.O. Box V, Juneau 99811, 465-4985; or call Janet Kowalski with the Family Support Task Force, 561-7613 in Anchorage.