

Bush signs legislation creating Native panel

President George Bush signed into law earlier this month legislation creating the Joint Federal-State Commission on Policies and Programs Affecting Alaska Natives.

"This new law represents an opportunity for Alaska Natives to further redefine their relationships with the federal and state government and forge a new partnership to address Alaska Native needs," said Julie Kitka, Alaska Federation of Natives president.

Last year, AFN published a report summarizing available data on the current status of Alaska Natives. The AFN report was an attempt to alert federal and state governments to the serious historical situation in which Natives now find themselves.

The AFN report summarized health, social and economic data that describe the current status of Alaska Natives. The data indicate that, despite improvements in health conditions, educational opportunity, standards of

living and access to governmental services, an increasing number of Natives face grave risks and declining economic opportunities.

In many Native villages, the rates of health and social problems — particularly those engendered by alcohol abuse — are abnormally high and many are accelerating. The segments of the Native population least capable of protecting themselves, notably children and young adults, are most at risk.

Three congressional hearings were held on the conditions affecting Alaska Natives both in Washington, D.C., and Alaska. The establishment of a high level commission was AFN's central recommendation.

"The formation of a high level forum which includes Alaska Natives is essential if the needs of Alaska Native people are to be met in a way that does not further erode our traditional values, lifestyles, cultures and institutions," Kitka said.