

New head of RurALCAP plans innovative programs for agency

by Jill McGuire

For the Tundra Times

Jeanine Kennedy, the newly appointed head of RuralCap, is busy.

One afternoon last week, she was preparing a newsletter, holding several staff meetings, fielding a constant flow of phone calls and granting a newspaper interview.

Yet Kennedy showed no sign of stress. This 48-year-old former housewife and teacher seems to thrive on her intense workload.

"I want to work in support of the values and systems of the Native culture," she says. "I really believe in it. Something that has lasted that long has to be true."

Kennedy takes over RurALCAP, a community action program formed in the 1960s to fight poverty, during a time of fiscal crisis.

Within the past year, its alcohol unit and its Headstart program lost \$225,000 in federal and state funding. Within two weeks of assuming her job, Kennedy says the Sheffield administration cut back funding for RurALCAP by 15 percent.

"We are just coping," says Kennedy. "Cuts this size are seriously felt in programs like Headstart, where there are so many children in need of help."

The cuts to the alcohol unit come at

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'Investing in people, teaching skills'

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a time when, according to Kennedy, alcoholism is the biggest health problem among Rural Alaskans.

To soften the impact of the massive government cutbacks, Headstart

workers voluntarily took a month off without pay to save money.

RurALCAP was formed in the mid-'60s as part of President Johnson's War on Povrty. Over the years, it has had many successes.

Its home weatherization program

was one of the first in the nation. The federal government had planned to build new homes for the villagers, until one local resident pointed out that all they really needed was some insulation.

"We found a cost-effective solution," says Kennedy.

Kennedy succeeded Bob Lohr as executive director. She was chosen from a field of more than 130 candidates, and has been in training for the job for the past two years.

The mother of four has been actively involved in Native issues for several years.

She was the director of Amouak, an alcohol treatment center for Natives. She also worked as a writer and researcher of the Alaska Native Foundation, where she first learned about Native issues.

While RurALCAP faces tough times, Kennedy believes the organization will once again rise to the occasion. She points with pride to the finding of a recent federal General Accounting Office report.

The report concluded that Community Block Grants, which help fund Headstart, actually save taxpayers' money.

"For every dollar spent, we save the government seven dollars it would have spent on social programs," the new director says. "We are investing in people, teaching life skills."