

•Editorial

'Giveaway Cycle'

We knew it was too good to be true. Alaska's largest newspaper has, in recent years, appeared to have become soft on Natives. Several editorials from the Anchorage publication have praised the Native land settlement as perhaps the best thing that ever happened to Alaska. During the bowhead controversy, the newspaper almost sounded like, Howard forgive us, the Tundra Times as it carried the subsistence rights banner. Then, last week, the newspaper was its old self in its editorial treatment of Native issues.

The old familiar phrases appeared once again, with broad references to "social service bureaucracy" and "giveaway cycle" in discussion of social programs designed for Natives.

We assume the veteran Anchorage publication does not make reference to the more innovative social service and health care improvements brought about in the villages recently. Certainly, the hunter who would have bled to death several years ago in the absence of a village health aide or the mother who now has a reasonable chance of giving birth to a live, healthy child is not caught up in this "giveaway cycle." Nor, we presume, are the likely suicide victims and productive alcoholics "crippled" by well-trained Native social service counselors from the "social service bureaucracy."

Perhaps it is the CETA worker, earning a whopping \$833 a month this summer, working as a village swimming instructor teaching kids how not to drown the first time they hit the water. Or, maybe it is the family of 12 moved from a breezy tar-paper shack into a decent house that is the victim of the giveaways.

Of course, there have been some wasteful and ineffective social service programs forced upon the Native population. This has been the case for many years with at least two programs provided for Natives. For generations, entire village populations in some areas were automatically placed on general assistance with no thought given by the bureaucrats for developing any alternatives to the welfare cycle. Training programs for years on end would crank out heavy equipment operators and welders long after there were too many skilled workers to fill those available jobs. The editorial would have been more than appropriate ten years ago or so. It is likely that most Natives knowledgeable about the inefficiencies would have welcomed such commentary. But not now.

Why not? Because, after years of complaining to federal and state governments that the people best qualified to manage programs designed for Natives were Native people themselves, Natives are slowly yet surely beginning to gain management responsibility over the programs. It has been a struggle to wrest the management away from the bureaucrats, yet steady progress is being made.

What is the result of this transition? A major difference is seen in the amount of general assistance indiscriminately provided to villagers. Under the old rules, the "giveaways" were for the most part automatic. Social workers were too busy or could not be bothered to take the time and effort to do the necessary case work for developing real alternatives to the welfare cycle. More often than not, a social worker in a Native-contracted social services program will look a young man in the eye and tell him, "You're strong enough to cut firewood. You don't need money for fuel oil if there's wood to be cut."

Employment training and placement programs also show noticeable improvement. Under the old system, employment and social service counselors would compete with each other for clients who could be used for numbers to justify ever-increasing appropriations. With Native managers who understand the requirements of the people they serve, programs complement each other to find effective ways of breaking the old patterns of dependency and failure.

There are some encouraging developments. It is unfortunate that the Anchorage newspaper chose to complain about circumstances which we have all disliked, but which have been with us for decades. What would be beneficial is for that newspaper to take a closer look at how the Native people themselves are reshaping the old programs as they gain management responsibility. It is a difficult process, but patterns can be broken.

And, institutions can change. We read it sometimes in their editorials.