

Top U.S. health official tours Alaska facilities

by Holly F. Reimer

Tundra Times reporter

U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Louis W. Sullivan was in Anchorage recently to look at Alaska's health care status and also make an assessment of the Indian Health Service and rural community health aide workers.

During a press conference held in Anchorage, Sullivan said his agency is committed to continue working with Alaska health officials to insure better health services on a statewide basis which includes Indian Health Service hospitals.

"There is a greater presence — of IHS — in Alaska than other states," Sullivan said, recognizing the percentage of the Native population is greater in Alaska compared to other states.

continued on page twelve

• Health official

continued from page one

Sen. Ted Stevens, R-Alaska, invited Sullivan along with Gail Wilensky, U.S. Health Care Financing Administration administrator, to visit several health care facilities in the state.

During their first hand look at Alaska's health facilities Sullivan said community health aides in rural Alaska were doing outstanding jobs.

He noted rural immunization programs were far more effective than those in some major cities in the Lower 48, despite remoteness of most of Alaska's communities.

Another topic Sullivan discussed was alcohol abuse.

He said the health service is aware of the alcohol problems which plague many communities across the state. He recognized the devastation of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and suicide. These he said are all direct results of alcohol abuse.

He said prevention measures will focus on local initiative, not governmental interference by federal programs.

Many communities throughout the state have taken the local option to ban alcohol and have attained sobriety and developed successful treatment and recovery programs.

During the press conference, Wilensky announced a tentative increase to the amount it will reimburse the state of Alaska for providing nursing home care.

A prepared statement said the decision to pay a higher reimbursement rate than other states means that the state will receive more than \$12.4 million for services provided Alaskans under the state's medicaid program.

"Alaskans' access to quality nursing home services, particularly in rural areas, would have been threatened if HCFA continued to apply Lower 48 rates to Alaska," Stevens said.

The state has been challenging HCFA's rate calculations since 1984. As a result of HCFA's decision to increase rates for Alaska, the federal government will reimburse Alaska for \$12.4 million to \$20 million in Medicaid payments made since 1984.