

Need Facilities for Deaf, Blind--

Laura Bergt Pens Concern to State Legislature

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Blind, deaf, hard of hearing and multiple handicapped children in Alaska should have educational facilities provided for them in this state.

That's the opinion of Mrs. Neil Bergt (Laura), and she's doing something about it.

Citing statistics provided by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the State Department of Educa-

tion, Mrs. Bergt wrote a letter last week to members of the Alaska State Legislature asking them to "take steps this year towards establishing a State school for the handicapped."

At the present time, she told the Tundra Times, handicapped children in Alaska must go out of state to receive education geared to their handicaps.

This costs the state, BIA and school districts from \$5,000 to \$6,000 for each child right now,

she said, and this figure does not include round trip transportation for students and escorts.

She believes the annual cost per child in a residential school in Alaska "(if we had one which would include tuition, board and room)" would be \$6,000.

And, she said, it would be easier for parents of handicapped children to visit their children if they were closer to home.

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Handicapped . . .

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Right now, she said, some handicapped children go to the Utah School for the Deaf and Blind because BIA and the state have a contract with that school, but the school is crowded, and "one day the contract will expire."

She wonders where Alaskan children will go then to receive the education they deserve.

"The problem is more critical than meets the eye," she said.

Her own daughter, Karen, now 11, is hard of hearing. Before Karen started school, Mrs. Bergt traveled to Washington State, Oregon and California looking for a school for her child. The Alaska Children's Association looked too.

The answer was always the same. The schools were too overcrowded to accept another student.

Then, Mrs. Bergt said, two or three weeks before school started, Vancouver School for the Deaf called to tell her they had an opening.

She has had to send Karen out to school twice, she said, because Fairbanks school district had no special classes for the hard of hearing or deaf.

Now, she said, Karen attends school in Fairbanks. But last year, for a time, it appeared that she would have to go away to school again. Because there were only four hard of hearing children in school here, the school district decided to drop the class for the hard of hearing.

A parent of a hard of hearing child called to tell Mrs. Bergt the news, and, she said, "I got on the phone. . . They finally reinstated it."

However, because many communities have only a small number of children with handicaps, Mrs. Bergt favors the idea of regional schools for the handi-

capped child. She is willing to settle for one centrally located school until others can be provided, but she favors the idea of establishing schools in three areas:

—One in Fairbanks;

—One in Anchorage;

—And one in Bethel—especially since so many children from the villages near Bethel suffer hard of hearing caused by otitis media, an ear infection.

Nationally, she said, educators do not believe that handicapped children should be isolated in special schools. "I fully agree," she said, "but with the foster home plan, which is very good, I am concerned about the future years. It will be difficult to find enough homes."

She was referring to projected figures for handicapped children in Alaska in 1975-76.

It is anticipated that in that year there will be 300 to 400 deaf children and 2,000 hard of hearing children in Alaska. The possible number of blind children has not been estimated.

"It is hard enough now to find a foster home for a high school student," she said, and "even harder to find a home for a handicapped child."

The expense of foster home care for each child, she said, is \$180 each month.

"Everybody I talk to agrees something should be done soon," she said. "But this is going to take time. If this legislature will just release some funds now...to start the research, they'll at least get the ball rolling."

She said, "this state has the opportunity to build an institution or institutions with the most modern, progressive and comprehensive educational concepts in the nation for the handicapped."