

# Stranded in Alaska's largest city



PHOTO BY BILL HESS

Being stranded without money or work in Alaska's largest city can be most discouraging. Thanks to the help of ASRAA, Alvin (not his real name) at least has the comfort of shelter at the Hyder House. What the alcohol-drug abuse counselor really wants is a job.

By Bill Hess

Tundra Times

Three years ago, Mike came to Anchorage from the Nome area for a medical visit to the Alaska Native Medical Center. Once the visit was through, Mike, a subsistence hunter and fisher and sometimes carpenter, thought he would like to spend a little more time in Alaska's largest city. Soon, he wanted to return.

His money was gone. He could find no work. He had no place to live. There was too much alcohol flowing through Fourth Avenue, and too many friends wanting him to drink it with them.

Today, Mike is still in Anchorage, wandering the streets with no place to live. He has been robbed of what little he possessed a number of times and has been beaten. It takes money to fly to Nome. Money is among the many items not possessed by Mike.

Moses came to the big city from his small Southwestern village with what seemed like a lot of money. He was anxious to spend it; to have a good time. He took himself a room in a fancy hotel, bought a great deal of alcoholic drink, and found a ladyfriend ready to party. The fun got a little too noisy for the hotel manager, and Moses and his friend were kicked out.

When the alcohol finally lost its hold on his brain, Moses' suitcase, money, and return ticket to his village were gone. He had no memories of what had happened. He did not know if he had been robbed or just careless.

Alvin's story was different. When he came to Anchorage from a small Southeastern community, everything looked good. A recovered alcoholic, Alvin was also an alcohol and drug abuse counselor, and a devout Christian. He had a good job working for the Cook Inlet Native Association, but left it for what seemed a better opportunity. The pay was higher, the prestige greater.

But conflicts, which Alvin blames on politics and personalities, arose. He left the job. Staying in motels and eating at restaurants, his money went fast. Soon, he was faced with living in the streets of Anchorage, a prospect he found most frightening. From those he had counseled, he had heard horror stories of An-

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# Fourth Avenue social pressures tremendous

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chorage street life; of robberies, rapes, beatings and murder.

Although the names of the above have been changed, their stories are real. They are not unique. According to Rinna Posehn, the executive director of the Association for Stranded Rural Alaskans in Anchorage, they happen in one form or another over and over in Alaska's largest city. Both she and counselor Mary Wolcuff come across such stories virtually every day.

Although he is willing to talk about his experiences, Moses blushes a little as he recalls the events which led to his becoming stranded. It has been some ten years since he had visited Anchorage. He did not know what to expect. Were it not for ASRAA, he, like Mike, could have been stranded a long time.

As it is, Moses will be given a ride to the airport the next morning and will fly to Bethel and on to the village. His ticket has been purchased by ASRAA but it is no freebie. He will be expected to pay the price of it back to the Association. In fact, Posehn notes, most of the people helped home by the organization do pay back their fares, even if only a small amount at a time. The money is then re-cycled to pay the way home for other Alaskans who become stranded in Anchorage.

ASRAA is funded with \$137,000 of municipality money to help people from rural Alaska who are not only stranded but are battling with alcohol as well. In the past, the Association has also had an additional \$65,000 of social services funding to help out stranded persons who do not have alcohol problems.

That money has run out, although the municipality assembly will be deciding this

week whether or not to replace it. Posehn is optimistic the municipality will come through, although she expects that some members of the assembly might question the expenditure.

The reason, she says, is that ASRAA is viewed most often as an alcohol treatment program, and some politicians are irritated to see money spent on people who seem sober enough.

"We say we're an alcohol prevention program," argues Posehn. "We want to keep people from rural Alaska off of Fourth Avenue. They may not seem to have an alcohol problem, but if they're stranded, and they have no place to go, sooner or later they are going to wind up on the avenue."

Everybody in rural Alaska knows about the avenue, Posehn explains. A rural person can often find friends and relatives there. If they have no place to go, drinkers or not, Fourth Avenue seems to offer at least a little comfort and solace.

Unfortunately, Posehn notes, the pressure to drink are tremendous on the avenue. Trouble often follows. Women get raped in shocking numbers, especially Native women. Anyone who spends much time on the avenue is likely to get robbed or beaten.

One reason, says Posehn, is that rural people tend to trust everybody. In the village, they know all their neighbors. They say "hi" to them when they meet them. When they are in trouble, someone will help them, whether it be with food, shelter, or whatever.

Villagers often expect Anchorage to be the same. It is not. Some who come on as being friendly are only waiting for the right moment to turn the person seeking their help

into a robbery or rape victim, says Posehn.

Additionally, many people coming into the city have no concept of how large and strange a place Anchorage can be, nor do they know how to survive in the city.

Wolcuff recalls one man who came in for medical purposes. In the village, he could walk anywhere he needed to go. He thought he could do the same in Anchorage. He knew the hospital was a large white building. He walked most of an

entire day. He discovered there are many large white buildings in the city and many miles of pavement.

Another client of Wolcuff's put her money into the bank at Bethel because she wanted a free plate being offered to new customers. She came to Anchorage and became stranded. Although the same bank was in town and contained several hundred of her dollars, she wandered about penniless for days, because she did not know how to get her mo-

ney back out of the bank.

ASRAA helps with problems like that. It also helps people find temporary low cost housing in different shelters about town until they can leave or find a job. It helps with taxi fares, and helps rural people learn what they must do in the city.

Yet Posehn expresses great concern for those who cannot now receive help because they do not have apparent alcohol problems. With federal cut-

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backs, medical travel has been greatly reduced. Some Natives of rural villages save up their money and come in on their own for ailments as serious as cancer.

They believe the Indian Health Service will fly them home, notes Posehn. They are wrong. It won't. In its current situation, ASRAA can not either, she laments, until they are drawn to Fourth Avenue and alcohol.

Mike, who does have an alcohol problem, never heard of ASRAA until very recently. Now, he hopes to return to the

Nome area after all these years. Unfortunately, he can't yet go. His drinking has gotten him into some minor difficulties with the law, and the court wants to send him through an alcohol rehabilitation program in Anchorage.

He just wants to go home. "I've seen my friends go through the alcohol program," he explains. "When they get out, they start all over again."

Alvin does not want to leave. He is glad to have the shelter found for him by ASRAA in the Hyder House, and is determined to find himself another job.