

Help needed on streets

The weather in Alaska's largest city has been beautiful the past few days. There has been plenty of sunshine, blue sky, and temperatures striking into the 50's. After the cold dark days of winter, the sun is now rising long before most people are up, and daylight is holding its own until about 10:00 p.m. It feels good. A person can walk around without even a jacket. The air smells good.

Despite the crowds, this makes Anchorage seem like a nice place. But down here, on Fourth Avenue, there are the constant reminders that for many, Anchorage is far from pleasant. Every day, people: white, Native, black, Oriental . . . whatever . . . can be seen wandering about, aimless and hopeless. They can be seen lying, their backs propped against brick walls, unconscious along the sidewalks, not far from the corners where the prostitutes eyeball men driving down the avenue, whether they are interested or not.

They come from everywhere, these people of the streets; job seekers from the Lower 48 whose luck ran out, people who have been around for quite some time, who seemed to be doing good, but for whom life took a sharp downturn. People from the small villages of Alaska; too many people from the villages. So many of these have come to Anchorage unprepared for what they would face here. Coming with the trust that has long been a rural Alaskan tradition, too many have been robbed, raped, and yes, murdered.

There are a number of people and groups working to help make things better here. One of these is ASRAA, the Association for Stranded Rural Alaskans in Anchorage.

Although ASRAA has helped many a villager stranded in the city to get back home, and has helped get others off the street and into one kind of shelter or another, it faces an ironic problem. Funded by the Municipality of Anchorage, ASRAA is seen primarily as a social service for people with alcohol problems. There were funds for Rural Alaskans who become stranded here, but who are not being plagued with problems.

These ran out. Yet, many people who need help but can't qualify are likely to be drawn down to the Avenue. Maybe after they have been robbed, raped, and fallen into the destructive cycle of drinking on the streets, some of them will qualify for help. We feel they should be helped before this happens. We urge the Municipality of Anchorage to restore the funds, and to help Rural Alaskans of all races to solve their problems before they become almost unsolvable.