



# IHS hiring freeze causing shortages

By Bill Hess  
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There is a shortage of nurses at the Indian Health Service hospitals in Bethel and Sitka's Mount Edgecumbe as the result of a hiring freeze ordered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. While conditions are not yet critical, they could become so if the situation lasts much longer.

The freeze, which affects the IHS nationwide, was ordered after U.S. District Court Judge James von der Heydt ruled that the Indian Preference Act had been violated in a six-year-old Fairbanks case. In that case, Lillian Preston, an Athabaskan from Nenana, had applied for a job as a social worker for the IHS but was rejected because she did not have a master's degree.

Von der Heydt ruled that the health service had not established hiring standards "reflecting the special needs of Indians" — and that by using civil service standards it violated the Indian Preference Act.

Under the Act, skills such as the ability to communicate with patients in their Native tongue and cultural understanding are given weight along with educational requirements.

The result of the hiring freeze is that in Bethel, 12 of 57 authorized nursing positions

are vacant and cannot be filled, according to Robert Olver, Personnel officer in Anchorage. There are seven vacancies at Mount Edgecumbe out of 54 authorized positions, Olver said.

In Bethel, this has resulted in head nurses involved in supervisory tasks pulling shifts and helping with patient care, although they would not normally do so. In addition, Olver said, three temporary duty nurses have been called in from a nursing pool in Anchorage.

While the situation is at least temporarily under control, Olver said, and nurses are not being required to work great amounts of overtime which could lead to fatigue, nurses tend to have a high turnover rate. The number of empty positions could grow.

There is not yet a nursing crisis at the Alaska Native Medical Center in Anchorage, but there is a troublesome shortage of lab technicians. "The problem is that when the freeze was imposed, we were in the process of recruiting three vacancies in the lab," explained Dr. Charles H. Nielson, medical director at the center. "In one week, we will lose a fourth technologist, which will leave us with about three-quarters of our normal staff."

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A student at Mt. Edgecumbe High School shovels snow off a fishing boat before heading out on a seal hunt. The BIA boarding school faces an uncertain future. (Tundra Times file photo by Bill Hess)

# IHS hiring freeze nearing critical stage

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The impact could be significant, Nielson explained. "The lab runs 24 hours a day seven days a week. When we get this short, it could be ex-

tremely difficult to keep up this schedule, if we can do it at all. There is the possibility that we could be forced to shutdown from, say, midnight to seven in the morning."

The trouble with this, said Nielson, is that patients in the Intensive Care Unit and on respirators need continual monitoring, much of it involving lab tests. The 24-hour emergency room also needs a 24-hour lab backup.

Possibilities include keeping a skeleton crew working around the clock, which could prove stressful, sending samples to other labs, which would present a very difficult situation for patients requiring frequent

lab tests. "Our only recourse might be to transfer the more seriously ill patients to other hospitals, such as across town to Humana Providence," said Nielson. "This would be extremely expensive. I can't predict how long we could pay the price before we depleted our health care budget."

How serious the situation gets depends on how long the freeze is imposed, said Nielson, noting that there may be some possibility of having an "excep-

tion" granted for the more critical positions.

If not, the situation could get worse. Even in Anchorage, the nursing turnover is high, and the medical center could join Bethel and Mount Edgecumbe in the shortage of nurses. Further, Nielson noted, five doctors, including an orthodontist, pathologist, pediatrician, physician, and an ear, nose and throat specialist will be leaving the staff this summer.