

Sheffield signs agreement

The Associated Press

JUNEAU — Gov. Bill Sheffield on Thursday signed an agreement with the Alaska Native Health Service to begin a joint attack on Hepatitis B, a disease that has reached epidemic proportions in several rural Alaska communities.

Sheffield is relying on the legislature to approve a \$250,000 appropriation, which would come from surplus funds in two other state programs, the governor said.

Pending legislative approval, screening programs could begin March 1, Sheffield said.

The governor got involved this week in finding money to battle the disease after Sen. John Sackett, R-Ruby, co-chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, objected to a proposed \$250,000 appropriations bill on grounds the money was already available in

the Department of Health, Education and Social Services.

As it turned out, he was right, and the legislature now must act to re-allocate the money for the Hepatitis B fight.

Sheffield said the agreement signed Thursday was "just the first step in our efforts to eradicate the disease."

The Native health service already has launched an aggressive screening program for Alaskans qualified for its services. The state effort is aimed at supplementing the program and providing funds for the expensive series of vaccinations.

The federal government has committed \$1 million so far to the screening and vaccination program, with another \$2 million in possible funds in the future.