

Gravel's TT Report

By Mike Gravel
U.S. Senator, Alaska

Alaska represents a unique blend of people from a variety of backgrounds. It is a credit to our state that a delicate balance has been found: Alaskans live and work together, yet maintain their individual characteristics.

KEEPING THE BALANCE

It's important to maintain this balance. The fact that we all live in one state does not and should not mean, for example, that Native tribal customs and traits must be erased in favor of an all-encompassing common heritage.

While all Americans are equal under the law, it's just as important that we maintain our pride in our individual cultural contributions—arts, crafts, folkways and dances, and historical monuments.

LANGUAGE BARRIER

This is particularly true when it comes to the matter of Alaska Natives.

We've all made great progress in preserving Native tribal artifacts and historical sites. But the question of language remains a difficult problem; while most Natives speak English; there are many who feel more comfortable with the old tongues.

Why should such people be punished because of difference in language?

JOBS AND COURTS

Yet, in a way, we do punish them, on a daily basis, and in numerous ways.

When it comes to getting a job, the person with a limited English-speaking ability is at a distinct disadvantage.

Even in the U.S. court systems, where fairness is absolutely essential, a person who has difficulty with English is at a disadvantage.

Consequently, I have co-sponsored the "Bilingual Job Training Act" and the "Bilingual Courts bill."

BILINGUAL JOB TRAINING

The Senate bilingual job training bill recognizes that millions

of Americans are restricted because of their limited English-speaking abilities. The fact that these people have difficulty getting work is both an unnecessary personal hardship and a waste of badly-needed manpower.

Look at the pipeline project: Here is an opportunity I've been working on, which will provide jobs for thousands of unemployed Alaskans. Surely the federal government at least could help provide money for bilingual vocational instructors and help train people for gainful employment.

Those are the aims of the "Bilingual Job Training Act."

COURTROOM INTERPRETERS

In a related development, the "Bilingual Courts bill" would insure courtroom interpreters for all persons whenever the need is demonstrated.

This basic right would apply to both civil and criminal cases and would cover actions in district courts, including those in Alaska. It would apply to all phases of the legal proceedings, including hearings and actual trials.

DEFINITE NEED

Alaska is one state where a definite need exists for such a bill.

Frank Flavin, who serves as the executive director for Alaska Legal Services, headquartered in Anchorage, told me he is in total support of the bilingual courts bill. He explained that there have been a number of civil actions involving Natives in which a courtroom interpreter was needed.

Other cases, he said, have required a Spanish expert or other linguist, in order to make sure that there was no miscarriage of justice.

I'm optimistic that this bill can be passed by Congress, thereby guaranteeing the basic right to equal justice under law.