

Native groups air views on AFN report

by Jennifer Gordon
Tundra Times reporter

The Senate Select Committee on Indian Affairs gave positive and serious reactions to the hearing on the Alaska Federation of Natives report "A Call to Action," said a spokesperson for AFN.

The hearing, held on March 3, included testimony from Gov. Steve Cowper, state senators and members of the Alaska Native community.

Julie Kitka, executive vice president for AFN, said she was pleased with the expeditious manner in which the Senate Select Committee dealt with the report. The AFN report was released in January.

The hearing lasted for four "intense" hours, said Kitka. She said she was delighted that so many people were given a chance to speak and that their testimony was varied. Most added to information addressed in the report, she said, but some brought up topics overlooked by the report.

Although the Select Committee seemed to know that Alaska Natives were having problems, Kitka said, they were surprised by the projected population growth. The report showed that an increasing number of Alaska Natives are coming into the "at-risk" age group.

Kitka said she believes that the report received attention quickly because the federal and state governments are both trying to balance budgets, and the report offers alternatives to programs instead of simply asking for more funding.

Below are excerpts from testimony given to Sen. Daniel Inouye, D-Hawaii, chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Indian Affairs.

Sen. Frank Murkowski, R-Alaska:

"The challenges presented to us are extremely complex because of the joint federal and state roles, plus the need for local self determination. We must find new and better ways to cope with the pressures of rapid cultural change — to recognize Alaska Natives as ethnically distinct groups of people whose culture and traditions are valuable to us all — and to live up to our responsibilities for the health, education and welfare of the Native people.

"This will require the federal and state governments to work closely with the villages to develop strategies the Native people can call their own. As history has shown us, governmental solutions imposed on village people do not produce the best results in many instances."

Sen. Ted Stevens, R-Alaska:

"Many here are concerned about the funding of the CHAP (Community Health Aide) program this year, which is funded to \$10.039 million in Fiscal Year 1989, a \$5 million increase in the program which the chairman helped on in appropriations. Twenty-seven million dollars is needed to adequately fund the program, especially in the area of training. We work very hard for our community health aides; they are the frontline 'Mash' units for health care access in rural Alaska."

Jeanine Kennedy, executive director for the Rural Alaska Community Action Program:

"Looking back on the recent history of Alaska it appears that many of the problems of today are related to the attitude of the non-Native care givers who have come to the state in great numbers to 'save' or 'help' the Native people. There are a few exceptions, but the great majority of the outsiders, the missionaries, the teachers and the administrators and employees of the

many different agencies are thoroughly convinced of the superiority of their own cultures and values.

"They believe that replacing the Native culture and values with their own is beneficial and therefore justified. This belief, typical of most dominant societies, persists and prevails in Alaska today. We have a great many well-meaning agencies, institutions and organizations who give lip-service to 'being Native' but, in truth, they do not share the values of the people they serve."

Willie Kasayulie, chief of the Yupiit Nation and chairman of the Association of Village Council Presidents:

"In all the problems identified by the AFN report, the key ingredient of the Alaska Native tribal governments is missing. Corporations, whether for profit or non-profit, tend to be biased because of the nature of where their funding source comes from. The history shows us that the corporations come and go. The nature of the tribe is inherent and therefore permanent.

"Who is/would be more responsive to the desires of its members? The corporations or tribal governments? I think we all know the answer to the questions I just mentioned."

David S. Case, an attorney for Tlingit and Haida:

"In Western Alaska and the Interior, there is little or no interest in forming new municipal governments in the villages. In fact, the fervent desire of many in these villages is to dissolve their existing municipal governments and use tribal institutions.

"People in these villages perceive that through tribal institutions, they will have a direct relationship to the federal government. More important, they perceive that they can have more effective control over the internal affairs of their own communities.

"The powers of tribal governments may be ambiguous in some respects, but at least they are not locked away in the foreign language of a state statute and dependent on the state's attorney general for interpretation."

Edward Thomas, president of Tlingit and Haida:

"Historically, my people have always taken great pride in working out their own problems, or at the very least working with others to resolve these problems. I am saddened for many reasons by reports such as the one we are discussing today. In many ways the government bureaucracies responsible for resolving the problems are also responsible for perpetuating them. There are at least three reasons for this state of affairs.

"1. People who are caught in between two cultures are unable to get the

help and support necessary to deal with these problems.

"2. The leaders in the typical Native community have been forced into spending most of his/her productive time defending the political existence of his/her tribal government.

"3. Too many precious resources allocated by Congress or the state Legislature are eaten up by government bureaucracies."

John Pingakuk, chairman of the board for Chevak Company Corporation:

"It is no accident that the AFN report relies so heavily on specific conditions in Calista villages to document the suffering of Alaska Natives. It is no coincidence either that most reports compiled to document external health, social and economic conditions in Alaska's Native Villages use specific examples of problems in Calista villages to document their findings. *The Calista Region is by far the most severely depressed region and group of people in the State of Alaska.*

"The lack of employment opportunities in the villages starts a tragic chain of events. Boredom, anxiety, a feeling of helplessness, lack of self-esteem, little hope for future prospects, social displacement or loss of social status and position are all characteristics of residents, especially among the young, resulting from the lack of employment."

Gordon Pullar, president of Kodiak Area Native Association:

"The debate over whether Native American cultures should be maintained as valuable ethnic resources within the larger national population or assimilated into the American mainstream has long been an issue in governmental policy.

"Historically, public education systems have operated with assimilation as their ultimate goal. The result of this tragically misguided policy has been the systematic erosion of all Native American cultures. Little wonder, then, that our young people, who literally do not know who they are, destroy themselves in a climate of despair."

Margaret Roberts, vice chairman of the Alaska Native Health Board:

"Mr. Chairman, our villages feel they have no control over their communities; no local control, no self-determination. Decisions are made far away at regional levels, in Juneau, or here, in Washington, D.C. As efforts continue to undermine our tribal governments, our villages are losing their sense of identity.

"If a person feels lost, dislocated, lacking identity, alienated and powerless to take control over his own life, he is likely to exhibit much of what AFN reports: depression,

unemployment, illness, self-destructive behavior, abuse, even suicide.

"The same is so for an entire community, especially when the village is confronted with trying to adapt to outside cultural influences and evolving changes in values. If tribal self-determination — local control — is not protected, strengthened and restored, I fear that little will come out of other initiatives that only seek to treat the symptoms, not the causes."

Janie Leask, president of AFN:

"AFN does not blame the federal and state government for all of our problems. Nor do we look to the government to be solely responsible for solving them.

"Responsibilities are shared and Native institutions, including village governments, Native regional non-profits and Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act corporations are willing to accept our share. Our call to action is not only to government, it is a summons to our people and organizations as well.

"We have come to tell you what we are striving to do, what we are asking of the state of Alaska, and what we are asking of the Congress."

Gov. Steve Cowper:

"We shouldn't forget that training is an important aspect of employability. As new jobs are created in rural Alaska, there, of course, is the need for trained local individuals. Besides administering any number of training programs under the federal Jobs Training Partnership Act and through our state's Department of Education, I have recently put forth two initiatives focusing on the training and employment needs of our citizens.

"One of the initiatives will make state monies available for retraining people who are currently receiving unemployment compensation from the state, a large number of whom are rural Alaska Natives. The second, and one that will require assistance from the federal government if it is to be successful, has to do with the establishment of a Jobs Corps Center in Alaska.

"I have asked our state Legislature to make available \$1 million to get such a center started. Job Corps Centers, as you may be aware, basically serve disadvantaged, at-risk young adults.

"We think that establishing a center in Alaska would help us better serve young male Natives who, as circumstances have demonstrated, are extremely at-risk for self-destructive behavior and suicide. If we can get these young people trained and employed, I think that half the battle will have been won."