

Space Communications Save Lives-

Satellite Pinpoints Two Native Women in Bush

WASHINGTON, D. C.—The lives of two native women were saved by the alert use of the communications satellite system serving remote villages in Alaska. The twenty-six villages served by the system are without other reliable communications. The system had been initially conceived by Alaska's United States Senator Mike Gravel a year ago and was instituted through his efforts in the Senate and in working with various governmental agencies.

During the evening of September 30, an Eskimo woman living at Anaktuvuk Pass was stricken with acute appendicitis. At about the same time, a pregnant Indian woman at Chalkyitsik entered labor prematurely and began hemorrhaging. Both villages, located north of the Arctic Circle, were receiving an educational program from the University of Alaska via the satellite system. This system utilizes receiving stations connected to a special speaker located in the communal building of each village.

A village aide, elected by the villagers, interrupted the transmission in Chalkyitsik with an emergency call for medical advice. A doctor in Anchorage was promptly connected into the system. Meanwhile, natives already listening to the broadcast in the village of Tanana alerted the doctor in the native hospital there.

The doctor in Tanana gave instructions through the satellite system to a former nurse who had been located in Chalkyitsik. The nurse worked with the doctor until a plane could be sent in to rescue the patient.

Officials at the University of

Alaska near Fairbanks were monitoring the emergency transmissions. Aware that the satellite services were scheduled to terminate soon, they telephoned the National Aeronautic and

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Space Administration at Rosman asking that the satellite continue functioning until the crisis had passed. NASA, which operates the satellites, agreed.

A short time later, the second emergency involving the woman with appendicitis at Anaktuvuk Pass was transmitted on the system, along with reports of heavy ground fog and falling snow. Unable to send bush planes into the villages to evacuate the two patients to a hospital, the doctor in Tanana continued giving instructions to both villages through the night.

The following morning, planes were sent in and the patients evacuated.

Commenting in Washington, Senator Mike Gravel said, "I am grateful for the teamwork between Alaskans, NASA, and

other officials for the effort which so dramatically saved two lives.

"I am proud of my fellow Alaskans who responded once again to the code of the North, but this time utilizing modern communications satellites.

"When I first proposed this system a year ago," Gravel continued, "no one could clearly visualize the type of emergency which occurs regularly and which would go unmet were it not for this system of communication.

This experience of just this one evening demonstrates the clear need for this system and its further expansion. In one night, it has provided its worth and justified the costs in time, money and skills which went into it.