

Additional Facts on VISTA's Ending

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The VISTA program was shut down in Alaska about two months ago, but additional facts surrounding its termination need to be pointed out even now.

On July 22, the Tundra Times carried an article explaining that the VISTA program in Alaska had pulled its 75 volunteers out of the villages by June 15 due to a lack of funding by the State Legislature. The remaining eight VISTA lawyers were to terminate their work September 15.

The State has been sponsoring the program since its introduction into Alaska. It appropriated about \$60,000 last year for supplies, telephone expenses, office space, travel and the salaries of a coordinator, an assistant and a secretary. All other expenses were paid by the Office of Economic Opportunity.

The VISTA staff requested \$85,000 from the State Legislature for next year but was turned down completely.

In response to the Tundra Times article, an ex-volunteer, Jeffrey Smith pointed out in a letter to the newspaper that the 75 VISTA volunteers were pulled out June 15, one to three months early, not due to a lack of funding but due to a decision of the VISTA staff.

It was not until after June 15 that the legislature made its decision.

According to Smith, the volunteers all received letters in May informing them of the early termination.

Acknowledging this to be the case, Jerry White, director of the State Economic Opportunity Office, explained that the program was closed down early in order "to acknowledge the many problems and concerns expressed by the volunteers and by several of

rather than State control. AVCP represents about 51 villages in the Bethel area.

Early termination, White wrote, would have allowed the Alaska VISTA staff to devote their full time and attention to performing the necessary planning and program development, with special emphasis on obtaining input from anti-poverty agencies, Native leaders, village councils, Native organizations and regional VISTA.

"This input was needed to redirect the VISTA program toward meaningful goals. This redirection was needed because of the problems that had developed in the program during past years."

These plans had already been made when the legislature acted.

White added that June was felt to be the appropriate time for early termination because then many of the villagers migrate to other areas for seasonal work, thus "drastically curtailing possible activities of the volunteers."

Why then did the legislature cut out the program when staff members had plans to reorganize it?

According to the statements of White and Willie Allen, former coordinator of the program, it is possible that the legislature did not even know of these plans.

No one connected with the program was called to testify before the committee, either to defend or criticize it, White and Allen said.

Also, White wrote, funds were deleted from the budget in the House Finance Committee "based on the sentiments of two legislators who were from areas where volunteers were serving. Other members of the committee felt," he said, "that if the legislators who should know the most about VISTA were not in

of state officials, was not responding to the felt and expressed needs of the urban and rural poor in their control of the VISTA network in Alaska.

"I think my year in Alaska as a Volunteer In Service To America was productive in terms of what the volunteers who supported the abolishment of state control did accomplish."

"VISTA," he added, "is dead unless the people are allowed to bring it back in their hands."

Also, in response to the July article, ex-volunteer Smith contended that a new sponsor would not find taking over the program as financially difficult as VISTA staff had implied.

In response, White said that perhaps the volunteer was correct in his assumption.

But, based upon the State's accumulation over a period of five years of office equipment, a new sponsor would have to make a capital outlay in excess of \$10,000 to maintain an equal level of activity, he continued.

White added that he recognized the job could be done for less but said that he believed "a decrease in resource would be reflected in the quality present."