

# Conference reviews justice in Alaska's Bush

More than 35 percent of all inmates in Alaska's jails are Natives. Yet Natives constitute slightly more than 15 percent of Alaska's total population.

Perhaps state Commissioner of Corrections Roger Endell said it best when asked about the percentages: "That's too many."

AFN, whose efforts were coordinated by Julie Kitka, held its fourth Bush Justice Conference in Bethel in November, and the alarming number of Native inmates in Alaska's jails was just one of several topics discussed. Participants also identified ways in which rural communities can become more involved in Alaska's child welfare, judicial and correctional systems — all of which heavily impact Native people.

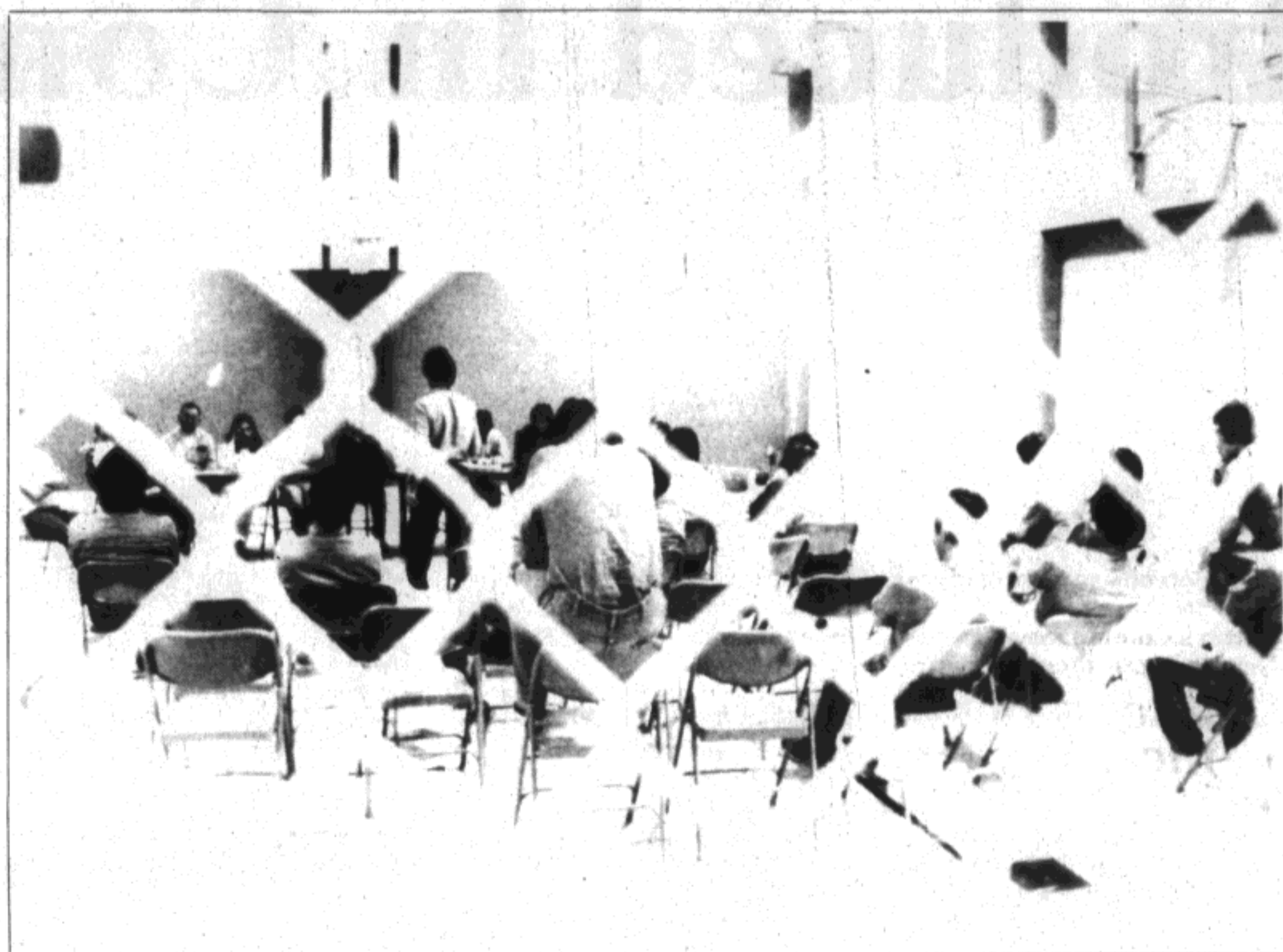
The idea of a conference, which was in the planning stages for the better part of a year, began with discussions among individuals who work to help Native inmates assert their rights and to organize support groups within correctional institutions. Eventually state funding for a Bush Justice Conference was approved and planning for the conference got underway.

Bethel was chosen as the site at the urgent invitation of the Association of Village Council Presidents, the regional, non-profit Native association which represents 56 villages in the Yukon-Kuskokwim region. One reason for the request is that nearly 50 percent of all the Alaska Native inmates were born in the Bethel region.

In discussing why this is so, conference participants felt that incarceration may often be the first, rather than the last, resort of our justice system when it deals with Native offenders. The Alaska Judicial Council, according to its executive director Fran Bremson, is now studying the state's new presumptive sentencing rules to see if they contribute to this problem.

Other problems, such as alcohol abuse, family disruption and the absence of village-level administration of justice as well as an ignorance of Native values in laws and regulations made by non-Natives may contribute to the abnormally high percentage of Native inmates.

Other areas covered during the three-day meeting included new programs proposed by the Department



**Native inmates discuss their concerns with Alaska's criminal justice system.**

**Tundra Times Photo**

of Corrections and community-based rehabilitative efforts currently underway. Conference participants shared information on efforts to amend the "local option" law which allows communities through election to ban the possession of alcohol. Presentations

cultural environment is often the beginning of an endless succession of temporary foster homes or institutional placements leading towards a feeling of personal failure. It has been found that a significant percentage of the young Native offenders now in

Child Welfare Act which provides statutory support for Native communities themselves to intervene in child custody proceedings. This act establishes federal guidelines asserting tribal jurisdiction over adoption and foster care proceedings involving Indian children and calls for states and tribes to implement the act through formal, written agreement when necessary.

The Bush Justice Conference working document, a summation of its discussions and conclusions, will be circulated to participants of the conference, Native councils and state officials by the end of February. Copies of the document are available through AFN.

Also, three one-hour television programs were edited from the conference. Tapes in both half-inch and three-quarter-inch formats are available from AFN for viewing. The tape titles are: "Native Inmate Concerns and Correctional Issues," "Overview of the AFN Bush Justice Conference," and "Current Indian Child Welfare Issues."

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also described efforts to provide better local police services in villages.

But another major topic of discussion revolved around child welfare and child custody. Too often lawyers, judges, and social workers physically remove a Native child from his/her community and extended family because of a perceived problem of personal family crisis. Removing that child from his own

state correctional facilities are "graduates" of the child custody system.

The conclusion drawn by most conference participants was that Alaska should do everything possible to support local Native communities in their own child protection and placement.

One piece of federal legislation discussed extensively was the Indian