

Statewide views on alcoholism

Despite criticism that its hearing schedule has been too hasty, the state Senate Special Committee on Alcoholism and Alcohol Related Legislation is proud of its summer-long effort.

The committee has been receiving comments on a legislative package submitted by Gov. Jay Hammond. Without exception, the hearings have produced the following thoughts:

...alcoholism is a problem throughout Alaska in rural and metropolitan Alaska,

...current activities by the State concerning alcoholism, are not working,

...sufficient monies are not available to combat the problem effectively, and the bulk of the monies now expended are being spent on only one part of the problem—the public inebriate,

...redirection of program policy toward increased education and prevention is needed, along with a greater emphasis on enforcement of existing laws,

...increased local options and control of programs is necessary.

...and an admonition that the situation will not go away simply by raising taxes and throwing more money at the problem. Positive action, and a new program approach, is needed.

The committee has adopted a policy to request of the general public, comments and suggestions regarding any aspect of the

subject of alcoholism and alcohol abuse, as well as comments on the Governor's Alcohol Package.

The committee has also departed from the traditional "for-

mal" public hearing process and conducted informal public meetings. A group discussion technique was employed and every person attending the meeting

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was encouraged to participate in the hearing. Specific questions were asked of people sitting in the audience and comments over testimony presented by one person was discussed by everyone.

"The response received by the committee has been phenomenal," according to Senator Mike Colletta, chairman. "In all of my legislative experience and of all the public hearings I've conducted or in which I've participated, I have never witnessed such an outpouring of public comment and concern. Alcoholism and alcohol abuse is truly the greatest human needs problem facing Alaskans today. The people throughout Alaska want help in a meaningful way."

The committee has conducted hearings in twenty-three local communities in Southcentral, North and Western Alaska, and nine additional hearings scheduled in Southeast. The committee has traveled to more places than any other legislative committee ever has before, including small and remote villages, as well as regional cities, such as Nome, Bethel and McGrath. No other legislative committee has ever been to some of the locations to conduct public hearings.

The committee has received direct testimony and comment from a very large cross-section of the Alaska population. Besides the average concerned citizen, comments were received from alcoholism program workers, law enforcement personnel, medical and hospital administrators, government employees and school educators. Indirect evidence also supports the findings that alcoholism is a major problem needing immediate action. Participants in the Alaska Public Forum listed alcoholism as their chief concern even though printed materials available to them did not mention the subject of alcoholism and alcohol related problems.

"The time has come to address and deal with a specific concern and problem directly identified by 'the man on the street,'" Colletta said. On January 4, 1978, the Committee will be holding one final hearing. This hearing is designed to contact and solicit comments from the whole state at one, and the same, time. The Alaska Public Broadcasting network will carry this hearing live in every location possible. This will enable a person in Barrow to be heard in Ketchikan, and a reply heard immediately by everyone in the state. Modern technology can be made to work for us to involve every Alaskan who wishes to participate, to solve the problem of alcoholism.

"I hope," said Senator Colletta, "that each and every Alaskan will take the opportunity, on January 4 to discuss and participate in this final public meeting."