

ALSC BATTLES TO IMPROVE

Overburdened Service Squeaks Through by 'Dedication, Bubblegum'

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Staff Writer

The critical issue of continued and improved legal services to the poor in the state of Alaska is at stake this week in Washington, D.C.

David Wolfe, executive director of Alaska Legal Services Corporation, is fighting for an increased budget for the state's Legal Services program in order to meet growing demands on a system already overburdened.

"Alaska Legal Services is a program stretched taut and held together by dedication, imagination, and bubblegum," said Wolfe. "It is time to replace the bubblegum with nuts and bolts."

"No other legal service program in the nation is confronted with the vast physical dimensions of Alaska, the dispersion of the poor, the weather conditions, the methods of travel, and the broad variety of legal and economic problems which prevail today in Alaska."

In spite of these facts, Wolfe pointed out that Alaska receives about half the funding of similar projects such as that of the Navajo. Staff lawyers work under impossible budgets and

trying conditions for far less pay than their counterparts — the public defenders, the district attorneys, and the attorney general's staff.

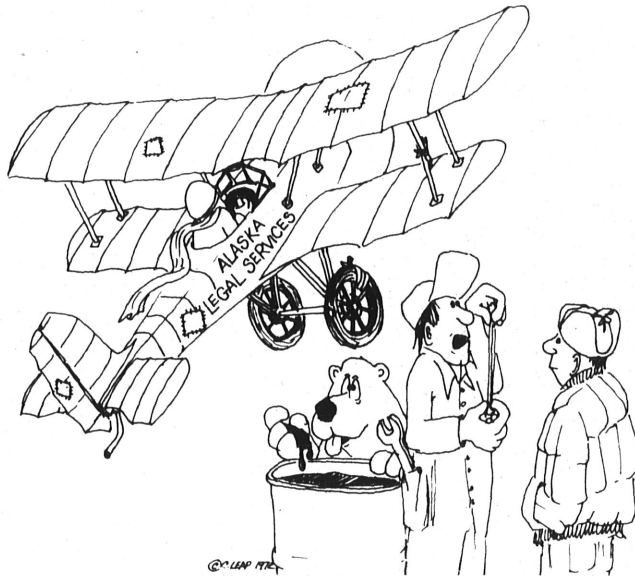
Depending heavily on fresh-out-of-law-school VISTA attorneys and "Reggies" (recipients of Reginald Heber Smith fellowships) the program suffers from inexperienced counsel and a high turnover rate.

As soon as a young attorney gains enough experience and familiarity with Alaska's unique law problems to be of real help, his year is up and all too frequently, he moves on.

The new budget would provide an increase in salary for staff lawyers and while it still would not approach that of the public defenders and district attorneys, it would provide a little more incentive for an idealistic young lawyer to stay within the Legal Services program, rather than go into private practice or other more lucrative forms of law.

In addition to increases for the present staff, the proposed budget would expand that staff and place it in more remote locations. With offices already located in Anchorage, Bethel, Fairbanks, Juneau, Ketchikan, Nome and Sitka, new offices would be established at Dillingham, Kodiak, Kotzebue, and Unalaska.

At the present time, for example, there is absolutely no service to the entire Aleutian chain. The Fairbanks office handles an area from around



"It's a kind of unique new government plan — lots of dedication, imagination, and bubble gum."

Seeking to upgrade delivery of legal justice to the bush, Alaska Legal Services asks for increased

funding from the national offices in Washington, D.C.

— Cartoon by CHARLIE LEAP

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Tok, near the Canadian border, as far north as Barrow.

These remote areas have high travel costs and high cost of living. The staff attorney in Nome, for example, has been working for almost 50 per cent lower salary than the Public Defender in Nome. Idealism can go a long way, but like bubblegum, eventually it gets stretched pretty thin.

While recognizing that there are other poor in the state of Alaska besides the Alaskan Native (whites, blacks, Spanish-American, and Phillippinos) a large bulk of the work of Alaska Legal Services is within the Native community.

Alaska has a population of over 60,000 Natives; 80 per cent live in rural locations separated by immense distances; 80 to 90 per cent of the Natives are eligible for the services of Alaska Legal Services.

"One of the biggest myths that exists in Washington, D.C.," said one of the staff attorneys, "is that suddenly the Alaskan Land Claims has made every Native rich. This is hardly the case."

"Alaska is a developing state and the issue is development for whom and at what cost to whom. Will the poor of Alaska reap their share of development or will the poor pay the cost of development with no return?"

"Alaska is a state whose land is being carved up by many interests," states Wolfe's proposal to the federal agency. "The poor must not be lost in the shuffle."

Few agencies seek involvement from the people they serve as zealously as Alaska Legal Services.

Through the mukluk telegraph (word of mouth, up and down the rivers), through personal contact with Alaska Legal Service personnel as they travel into remote areas, through the assistance of Rural CAP, and through other means of publicity, more and more people in bush are becoming aware of the legal help available through the program.

This has produced a "client population up in arms demanding our services in hundreds of places at once."

Many of the items included in the new budget are the direct outcome of ideas contributed by the poor themselves. Seeking even greater input from their clients, Alaska Legal Services is asking for funds to set up client advisory boards in twenty villages.

Meeting four times a year, these boards would play a strong role in setting priorities and needs and in seeing that the program is people-oriented and not bureaucracy-oriented.

Another direct link to people will be a program establishing eight community aides, bi-lingual para-legal personnel who will assist staff lawyers in gathering data, conducting interviews, preparing cases, and translating for clients who do not speak English.

There are five community aides now in training and staff attorneys are enthusiastic about the advantages of Native-born and Native-speaking para-legals. In time, a promising crop of full-fledged Native attorneys may develop out of this program.

The Alaska Legal Service Corporation has championed many causes which have benefited the poor in general and the Alaskan Native in particular.

In the last session of the Legislature, they fought for and won oil spill liability legislation which guarantees recovery for losses to persons using the land for subsistence purposes.

They have fought for important rights within the fishing industry and assisted villagers in forming co-ops.

They have intervened in public utility rate increases and in the administration of housing authorities to protect the consumer.

Just last month, Alaska Legal Services brought action in the Superior Court of Anchorage on behalf of all Native children in the state.

"Alaska," they stated, "is an education system which yanks children from their home villages and sends them thousands of miles away to BIA high schools or boarding schools in urban areas."

The case seeks to affirm the right to every child to receive a high-school education where he lives.

Alaska Legal Services has an impressive record of successes both in the courts and in the legislature. Every Alaska Supreme Court decision in a case involving Alaska Legal Services except one has been decided in favor of ALSC's client.

Just as they are concerned with the schoolchild being transported long distances to school, Alaska Legal Services berates the similar plight of the citizen en route to trial.

One of their prime objectives is "to drag the justice system to the places that need justice rather than dragging the citizen to the justice system hundreds to thousands of miles away."

In an effort to improve conditions, Alaska Legal Services seeks to hold a new Bush Justice Conference. Such a conference was held a few years ago "with a dramatic increase in understanding and commitment to solving rural problems, particularly those relating to the justice system."

"The time is right for another such conference," states the proposal.

It commends the judiciary of Alaska as being "forward-looking and intelligent" and Alaska as being "a gigantic place where the legal structure and relationships are just being formed."

"Before they're cemented in precedent," it argues, "the poor must be heard."

The budget submitted in Washington was worked out by dedicated people who obviously, in the light of their pay scale, are not working for personal profit. They are people concerned with their clients, the poor of the state of Alaska.

Unless the increase in budget they request is granted, Alaska Legal Services will not be able to meet the urgent demands of their growing number of clients. The dedication will wane, the imagination will fail, and the bubblegum will finally break.