

Treatment program helps Native youth

by George Figdor
SEARHC Information Officer

SITKA — As 17-year-old Cathy steps forward and faces the tall spruce, she calls out to the group behind her, "I, Cathy, agree to do this event."
"Climb-on, Cathy!" the group responds enthusiastically. Cathy quickly climbs a series of footholds to a position about 8 feet above the group. From here she is to lean out backwards and fall blindly into the outstretched arms of her "teammates" below.

The event is the "trust fall," and the participants are the first group of clients at the new statewide substance abuse treatment center for Native youths that opened last week in Sitka.

The program is run by the Southeast Alaska Regional Health Corp., one of two Native health corporations recently awarded an Indian Health Service contract to provide substance abuse treatment services for Alaska Native youth.

The other program, offered by Tanana Chiefs Conference in Fairbanks, was scheduled to open this spring.

The 10 youths enrolled in the first session of the 60-day program at the SEARHC Adolescent Residential Treatment Center range in age from 16-19 and are from Ketchikan, Anchorage and Togiak.

The program is based at the SEARHC Mt. Edgecumbe Hospital campus. It uses renovated duplex buildings as well as the SEARHC High Adventure Ropes Course — a series of outdoor challenge activities, such as the "trust fall" recently set up on the hospital grounds.

"I'm scared," confesses Cathy, hesitating to let go of the secure handle anchored to the tree.

"We're here," the group shouts from below, with each member adding further encouragement. Paul Schmauss, recreation therapist for the program, who directs the "trust fall" exercise, quietly reassures the youth: "Breathe deep. . . Make a commitment. . . Remember what we talked about. . . Step beyond your comfort



Two ARTC students, secured with safety harnesses, challenge themselves on the "Tandem Tightrope."

By the end of the day, Cathy and the others in the group have experienced the satisfaction of overcoming dozens of seemingly impossible challenges in the Ropes Course, including the "tandem tightrope," in which pairs of youths traversing a high wire, protected by a system of safety harnesses, carefully pass each other at midway point. Later on in the session the group will have an extended outdoor challenge experience during the program's wilderness component at False Island, 30 miles north of Sitka.

Several years ago, in the face of growing substance abuse, suicide and related youth problems that were reaching epidemic proportions in the Native villages, SEARHC's community-based board of directors targeted the prevention and treatment of these problems as the organization's top health care priority, explained Gorman.

remote facility concentrating on developing greater self-sufficiency and healthier lifestyles and on reconnecting with cultural traditions.

Gorman said that for many years SEARHC sponsored a summer camp program near Sitka for high-risk Native youths and that informal counseling within the context of such outdoor adventures has been shown to be a very effective treatment approach.

Among those who bring extensive experience in adventure-based counseling to the SEARHC program is Dave Pederson, treatment supervisor. Pederson, who joined the SEARHC staff in February, has worked with a number of outdoor challenge programs, including the Alaska Children's Services' Adventure Based Program in Anchorage.

Pederson said that, in addition to the wilderness component, another unique feature of the program is its use of a "cohort group" approach. Most

son who will be responsible for providing continued personal support when the youth returns to his or her community.

"Change is ongoing," stressed Pederson. "We can't fix kids; we can only be a catalyst."

While the Adolescent Residential Treatment Center program does have a full-time aftercare specialist to coordinate community followup, it's the local community support on a day-to-day basis that makes a difference, said Pederson.

"It's cruel for a community to send its youth if there will be no support when they return," he said.

The program accepts Native youth ages 13-20 from all regions of the state who are experiencing "problems in life related to substance abuse." The program is entirely voluntary. Youths apply through their local substance abuse counselor.

"It requires a high level of commitment from the youth as well as the community," Pederson stressed. "Funds are limited, and we have a responsibility to get the most for the money available."

There will be a cohort group of eight to 10 youths in each 60-day session. Care will be taken to have a limited age range in each group and to have at least three or four youths from a given village, so that there is a basis for a peer support group back in the community, said Pederson.

A major feature of the program, the outdoor challenge experiences are just a part of a "holistic" approach that addresses the mental, emotional, spiritual as well as physical development of each student, explains Pederson.

Students will spend part of each day continuing their school studies — or becoming involved in G.E.D. Other components include alcohol and drug education classes, individual and group counseling sessions and cultural awareness activities.

Part of each day will be spent in "talking circles," where students can share feelings in a supportive environment, said Pederson.

Those needing more information about the Adolescent Residential Treatment Center may contact the SEARHC Mt. Edgecumbe offices — 222 Tongass Drive, Sitka 99835. Phone: 966-2451.

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—Mark Gorman

zone."

Finally, Cathy does take that deep breath and lets out the designated warning, "Cathy falling!" Then she lets go, falling several feet onto a soft bed of waiting arms and emerges with a broad grin. The group rewards her effort with the "magic hug" ritual, a show of support that makes every effort a success.

"This is what it's all about," said Schmauss, "trusting and caring."

"Our program is not traditional substance abuse treatment," said SEARHC's Mark Gorman, acting director of the treatment program. "It focuses on the positive, on personal growth, on building self-esteem." That's what attracted IHS interest and support, said Gorman.

SEARHC began developing the plans for the treatment center more than two years ago, looking at model programs from throughout the United States and Canada. Gorman pointed out that SEARHC was the first Native organization to apply for funds when Congress passed the Omnibus Drug Act and appropriated funds for the first Native-specific youth treatment service.

Gorman said he is optimistic about the program, but cautioned, "We all recognize that success in this area is not going to be easy."

Last year SEARHC acquired the surplus U.S. Forest Service camp at False Island to use as a base for the wilderness challenge component. Each group will spend three weeks at this

adolescent programs are the "revolving door" type, said Pederson. Youths enter and leave the program at different times. In a cohort program, participants begin a session together and experience the entire program as part of a continuous group.

"They develop a sense of community," said Pederson. The "students" learn to live together — sharing meals, caring for the facility and developing close relationships, he said.

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Another feature of the program is the "committed partner" requirement. Each youth who is accepted into the program must have at least one per-