

Health care demands up, funds low

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Public health in Alaska is at a crossroads as the state faces a rising population and shrinking oil revenues. Dr. John Middaugh, state epidemiologist, told a state Senate committee Wednesday.

In brief teleconference testimony before the Health, Education and Social Services Committee, Middaugh said budget problems pose a dilemma for preventative health services just as Alaska must weigh new environmental health and workplace hazards.

"Very hard decisions are being looked at and being

made" by health officials, he said. But there now is a "very definite lack of expertise to face occupational and environmental problems."

Alaska's preventative programs are forced to compete for money, "yet all of them are cost effective," Middaugh said.

In the state's rabies control program during the past six years, he said, "we saved \$3.2 million in vaccine and medical treatment alone."

While Alaska had the "unenviable distinction" six years ago of leading the nation's gonorrhea outbreak, that rate in the state has been cut in

half, he said.

But competition for money is causing problems, he explained. For example, vaccines to prevent diphtheria, tetanus and polio no longer are provided to private doctors "because of a budget shortfall."

Restaurant inspections and other public health activities have been cut, he said, and there have been salmonella outbreaks in Fairbanks, and giardia outbreaks at day centers in the state.

"We shouldn't have to have restaurant outbreaks to remind us we need restaurant inspections," he said.