TCC says 'black phones' crucial to Interior villages' health care

Tundra Times staff

A federal judge has ruled in emergency hearing that the Alaska Native Health Service cannot terminate the Alascom satellite communication clinic phone system until it can be verified that Interior village health clinics using the "black-phone" lines have alternative telephones to use.

For the past decade, the phones have provided Interior villages with a link to physicians in Fairbanks. Medical care is generally available only from village clinics manned by Health Aides, who perform minor medical procedures. The black-phone system is used to summon emergency help and to stabilize patients under the direction of Fairbanks physicians.

Wade Henry, property manager for the Alaska Native Health Service, said termination of the black phone system will save the health service about $205,000 per year. Henry also said that the removal of the system will have no negative effect on village health care.

Blackphone lines were necessary when standard telephone service was unavailable, but that is no longer the case, said Henry.

But the Tanana Chiefs Conference, which filed for the temporary restraining order, argues that the system is crucial to the health care of Interior villages.

"Phones cannot be installed overnight in rural Alaska. And if the phones are cut off tomorrow, the crucial telecommunications link will be severed totally in seven villages, and a massive reorganization for the rest of the system is necessary," said TCC attorney Mike Walleri in court documents.

The suit states that some of the clinics would have to close down without the service, and that termination of the system would pose a health risk to Natives.

"The action needlessly endangers Native lives in emergency medical situations," the suit further states.

Henry said that Alaska Native Health Service personnel previously checked to make sure Interior clinics had alternative phones, but that they would be checked once again, after which the system will be terminated.