

Alaska Medicaid, General Relief Medical Under Fire

By JACQUELINE GLASGOW

The Alaska Medicaid Program and the state-funded General Relief Medical program came under fire from the Alaska Federation of Natives at legislative

hearings in Juneau, January 18.

Testimony given before a joint session of the Senate and House committee on Health, Education, and Welfare, proved somewhat abrasive to the State's

Department of Health and Social Services.

The AFN contends that present administrative decisions within that department and the overall policy stance are "alarming

in their implications and are certain to have a detrimental effect on Alaska Natives and all other disadvantaged people who would be served by this program."

In general the AFN has taken the position that the practices now in effect are "frankly discriminatory on the basis of race and are not consonant with the

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Alaska statutes and deny equal protection under the law."

Carl Jack, Director of Health Affairs for the AFN, gave his testimony after extensive study of the new instruction manuals developed to guide the possible providers of health services in determining eligibility of recipients.

The instructions identify Native people as a special class of recipients under the General Relief Medical portion of the program, classifying them as ineligible on the basis of their implied eligibility for services from another resource — namely the U. S. Public Health Service, Native Health Service.

Jack claims this is "clearly a blatant attempt to shave a substantial amount of expense from the State's medical assistance programs by limitation of services to Native people."

"The Alaska Native," states the AFN, "has always sought and asserted his status and rights as a full citizen of the State of Alaska and the United States."

"His special status as a beneficiary of federal programs operated with funds appropriated specifically for services to Native Americans does nothing to abrogate his rights as a citizen of his state and his union. This is not an assertion we make lightly.

"...we receive these special services because the Congress of the United States recognizes a solemn commitment to Native peoples based on the Constitution and numerous other legal precedents over the past two hundred years."

The AFN holds forth the legal position that the Indian Health program is one which is in addition to and not in place of other programs available to all other citizens.

"This position has been affirmed in litigation in several state courts in the South 48 when services available to all other citizens were denied to

Indian people."

The AFN points to several cases of "de facto discrimination" where Native people were denied services under the present state General Medical Relief program when they met all eligibility criteria except one — they were not white.

The AFN firmly states, "We will accept nothing less than full equality under all State-operated programs," and calls upon the legislature to adopt a realistic budget that will "provide equitable relief for all needy Alaskan citizens."

The AFN attacked other portions of the combined Medicaid and General Relief Medical Programs, calling attention to the unduly complicated paperwork procedures.

Many physicians, dentists, and pharmacists have expressed irritation with the present system, and may opt not to participate in providing services.

AFN feels this would work an undue hardship on recipients, especially in communities where many medical practices are not accepting new patients.

Even in the case of the providers who do elect to stay in the program, but are hostile toward it, AFN is concerned that their dissatisfaction and hostility may be transferred to the patient who "already suffers the social stigmata which our society visits on 'welfare people.'"

AFN calls for strong measures to eliminate "unnecessary paper shuffling."

"We take strong exception to what seems to be a trend in state government to establish a whole new corps of bureaucrats overnight by administrative fiat."

A spokesman for the State denied that there was an excess of personnel to administer the new programs.

"As I see it, we don't have one more person than is needed. The fact is that there have been so many cases of welfare fraud, of people claiming benefits who NOT eligible, that there is no

way to eliminate the screening process."

The AFN recommendation includes large-scale automation of much of the data processing and a study of other state's programs where almost identical programs were started years ago without adding new field office staff.

Finally, the AFN asks that the State clarify payment for services by para-professionals.

There has been a growing trend to utilize nurse-practitioners or physician-assistants in Alaska's bush areas to bring health care to a large part of the State where on-the-spot care was not available.

Under Alaska law, these para-professionals are supervised by a licensed physician.

The AFN is concerned that under the present wording of the department's new manuals, these people may not be paid for services. This would mean a large setback in bush health care and a needless amount of flying-in of patients from the bush.

This parallels a common flaw in the present practice of denying General Relief Medical help to Natives and referring all Native people to the Public Health Hospital in Anchorage.

Countless numbers of people are flown from remote communities for treatment that could be accomplished closer to home.

Although abortion has been made routinely available for non-Native girls in Fairbanks, for example, a Native girl must be flown to Anchorage for the same operation. She is consequently removed from supportive family and friends and often suffers acute depression.

The Alaska Federation of Natives supports the standardization of eligibility requirements for all citizens and an overall look at administration policy so that the staff administering the programs act "NOT as gatekeepers and custodians of clients, but people who provide tangible assistance to improve the life and self-reliance of disadvantaged citizens."