

AVCP may sue to retain cash program

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Massive federal budget cuts which will cut off all Bureau of Indian Affairs general assistance programs and the cash assistance supplements to 5,000 Alaska Natives may be challenged in court, according to Harold Napoleon, president of the Association of Village Council Presidents.

Napoleon, stating that the impending cutoff of federal cash assistance will create a "human disaster area" in the AVCP region, said Monday that his board had instructed him some time ago to investigate the possibility of suing President Ronald Reagan and responsible persons in his administration to stop the cutoff.

The BIA spent an estimated \$9 million in Alaska last year

for the cash assistance program. Other states with Native American populations have received the assistance but their programs are being saved while Alaska's is cut.

According to state BIA officials, the BIA general assistance program will end at midnight, Sept. 30, the end of the 1981 fiscal year.

U.S. Senator Ted Stevens said Friday that he was able to obtain a \$30 million transition grant for Alaska but he said that that grant would not cover the cash assistance program which provides as much as \$750 per month to needy Native and American Indian persons.

Stevens said that the federal government originally only

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'Human disaster area' predicted if federal budget cuts go through

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granted cash assistance to American Indians who lived on reservations but began to provide cash supplements to Alaska Natives because the state of Alaska was too poor to provide assistance to Natives.

Stevens said that the feeling in Congress is that the state can now afford to assist Natives so the cutoff was announced.

State regulations also only allow for a maximum of \$80 per month per person for assistance. The BIA program allowed a family of four to receive as much as \$700 per month.

But the cutbacks in Alaska are expected to bring many hardships particularly on people living in Bush areas.

The cash assistance money was a regular cash grant given to Natives to use for food, heating fuel, fishing nets, bullets—any thing that they needed to help them survive, said Napoleon.

He said that the AVCP is investigating the possibility of challenging the budget cuts on the grounds that the Native peoples of Alaska were not consulted in the process.

Napoleon said that Senator Stevens did the best he could with the climate of Congress and the President on the cuts but he said that people who made the decision to cut the BIA funds were not acquainted with the situation of the Alaskan Native.

"The administration made their decision to cut the funds based on the information they had on the people of the whole state—not just the Natives. They felt there is enough money to take care of the Natives."

Napoleon said the suit would contest the President's and administrations ability to terminate programs to Natives without Congressional approval. The Congress did not consult with the people. The benefits of each program was not discussed and nobody seems to care about the benefits they offered, said Napoleon.

Napoleon predicted that the cutbacks would be especially disastrous on his region because he estimated that 20 to 30 percent of the population in the AVCP region receives some form of general assistance. He said that the AVCP area receives about \$1.2 million through BIA and AVCP and he doesn't expect any money next year.

"I know there will be a great deal of suffering at the village level especially where the general assistance program is terminated. This is not a scare. It is a fact that there will be a human disaster."

Napoleon said the belief that the state can absorb the money and cost of funding such programs is wrong for two reasons. First, the state is "nowhere near prepared to deal with the problem," and secondly, the state is not able to tailor make an assistance program for Alaska Natives or any special ethnic group without including others not in that category. It is estimated that if the state were to organize a similar program to the BIA cash assistance program but were to allow all would-be eligible regardless of ethnic background, the program

would cost \$50 to \$60 million instead of \$5 to \$6 million.

Napoleon said that his region is working to try to provide help

to those needy persons through community contributions from the better off.

But, he says, he can't do it all.

In the Bering Straights Region, Charlie Johnson said last week-end that the cutbacks will not be as severe because the Koweruk Association used federal assistance money to provide economic opportunities instead of social service programs.

"We took a different direction a year and a half ago toward economic development rather than

social services and have minimized the effect."

Marie Shwind of Mauneluk Association of the NANA Region said that she fears the cuts will be hard but had been told late Monday afternoon that because Mauneluk had not completed its

1982 fiscal year grant request, the region would be able to continue its social service operations on the 1981 basis. That would include continuation of the cash assistance program.

It is expected that some 5,000 families statewide will be effected by the cutoff.

In addition to the cash assistance cutoff, a federal jobs program known as Public Service Employment will lose \$8 million

in monies that the non-profit regions had used to provide jobs to 1,088 clients.

The federal Comprehensive

Employment and Training Act program already has been cut off and many villages which depend on CETA public service workers are now without those services.