

IHS staffing crisis . . .

of care is still "a good, acceptable standard."

It is not a problem of apathy or lack of equipment. Those on the job are giving excellent care, there is just not enough of them. They are doing double duty and because of that, certain areas are not functioning at full capacity. But both Mala and Ivey admit that if things get much worse, the patients will suffer.

In a nutshell, the problem is money. The federal government in Alaska is in bad straits, according to Ivey, because it just cannot compete for its personnel with the private sector.

At the special meeting Tuesday, dentists testified that they could be making three times as much with the Teamsters or in private practice and that it is extremely tough finding assistants. As for the physicians, they do not get paid to be on-call, something that is taken for granted in the private sector.

Ivey attributes much of the staff shortage to nationwide inflation plus special Alaskan conditions like the pipeline and the Native Claims Act. But the real crux of the matter is what the administrators call the lack of a "locality base" for gauging professional salaries, something

that is done for blue collar workers.

In essence, the government fixes salaries in two categories. One for the "wage grade" group, or blue collar workers, which is based on an annual adjustment compared to the going local wages of an area. Currently those wages are going up 15 per cent annually in Alaska.

The other salary category is that applied to professional and clerical workers under the government's GS rating system which is not based on a survey of local wages. Watson estimates that wages in this area are increasing only 2½ per cent annually.

Obviously there is a broad gap between the two and the results are graphic since professionals make up nearly 80 per cent of the Alaska IHS work force. The normal lapse in hiring professionals for Alaska IHS is 5 to 6 per cent. At present, it is up around 10 per cent.

And unlike past predictable shortages, what has been seen in the last few weeks is that "shortages are getting into more and more job categories at the same time," says Charles Watson. He reports that the

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normal yearly low point usually comes in October. This year it hit in August.

There is also a gap in fringe benefits being offered and length of work week. But the most obvious detractor is the intense pressure placed on the remaining staff. "They get plain old tired," says Bob Singyke, executive officer, and a native from Nome.

While government salaries are falling further and further behind the private sector, the long range view also shows that even if Alaska IHS could fill all the positions it is funded for, it would still be short, when measured against comparable institutions, by 27 per cent.

The Alaskan picture is grim, and it is part of a larger staffing problem experienced by IHS nationwide. Ivey believes Congress is aware of the problem and that there has been no lessening of the federal government's commitment to native American health care. The Indian Health Care Improvement Act is cited as an example of that commitment and if funded will basically do the trick as far as staffing shortages. But for now, that bill is only an authorization and not an appropriations

bill. Still, says Charles Watson, the bill will not create equity of salaries not set up the locality base needed to make Alaskan salaries competitive. "Health care in the private sector is galloping up here," he says. Hence, the crucial drain on qualified people."

And so, the briefing and appeal to the Alaska Native Health Board which reports to the regional corporations, and which, as Ted Mala feels, can kick in some political clout to help. The meeting focused on recruitment and the board was asked for referrals of qualified people.

Gerald Ivey feels the meeting was helpful. The board agreed to address the situation in a unified way and was "very concerned and interested in the problem." He's optimistic and says he was encouraged by their interest in participating especially since they directly influence long-range planning and policy and help write the "program packages" of unmet needs that get submitted to Washington.

There was some disagreement, however, on releasing the story to the news media. One Health Board member felt strongly that people should not know the situation, but most felt the real problem had to get out in the open and the majority supported approaching the press.

Meanwhile, Bob Singyke was also addressing the Regional Health Directors about setting up emergency room services in the regions, a plan which has already been funded by Congress. A special ER staff would be one important way to relieve the pressures of the current unsatisfactory on-call system which affects the regular hospital staff. "We expect too much from all our staff," he says, "everyone is stretched."

For now, the number one priority is nurses. That is where the most direct impact on health care is felt and where the shortage is most critical. Charles Watson says a concerted effort is being made and in the last two weeks what was a shortage of 21 nurses in Anchorage has been reduced to 13.

Besides the short-term recruitment push to get staffing back up to the actual number of funded positions, the administrators are internally analyzing the budget to see where it might be possible to redirect funds into direct health care.

Bob Singyke admits there might have to be a cut-back on some existing services while maintaining an "acceptable" level of health care. Ted Mala says that is already being done. Admissions have been cut and department heads report that they are now having to pick and chose patients carefully.

But Gerald Ivey says he is not anticipating any cuts at this time and that the quality of care being provided will continue. He does say that there is a good deal of concern by employees that if the staffing gets much lower a considerable decrease of quality will occur. The professionals tell him this has not happened yet.

Ivey says there are other options open long-range. "The native people have other avenues for funds and can express their concerns to legislators and regional corporations," Ted Mala also thinks Alaskans should take advantage of an election year and that it's an opportune time to put the pressure on, to write

letters, and to force Congress to look at the situation.

Mala feels the problem is no one's fault, that people just will not accept positions because of the low, fixed salaries and that the solution is to make the pay competitive.

Ivey is in full agreement and wants a similar concept for professional salaries as the wage board system. "Let's get away from this national average stuff. It doesn't matter what they're paying in Georgia," he says. "What is the market in Alaska going to hire?"

Although Ivey feels the severity of the problem has to be understood, he laughs and says, "I haven't given up yet, not anywhere near." The main thing that keeps him optimistic is the commitment of the staff that remains. "We're fortunate to have the knowledgeable, dedicated staff we have or we couldn't begin to provide the level of service we are providing."

Ted Mala says the nurses testified at the Native Health Board meeting that they were staying on because they liked the hospital and like working with native people.

There seems to be a pulling together and a new cooperation under the pressurized conditions and so far, no one is taking sides. Bob Singyke says, "That went out four or five years ago. It was necessary for the feds to wake up."

HELP WANTED

"Financial Specialist." Under an OMBE-funded program, assist minority businesses statewide in getting established, expanding, and operating profitably. Specialist will assist in feasibility studies for potential business ventures, package loans and grants, aid and provide assistance in setting up financial management systems and such other technical help as is necessary. Salary DOE. Send resume to Gordon Jackson, Acting Director, Alaska Economic Development Office, Alaska Federation of Natives, Inc., 550 W. 8th Avenue, Anchorage 99501 or call 274-3611. An Equal Opportunity Employer. Closing date Sept. 13, 1976.

POSITION VACANCY

ALASKA STATE COMMISSION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
POSITION: Human Rights Field Representative III (Assistant Director Northern Region). Range 20A.
SALARY: \$2,534 per month.
DUTY STATION: Fairbanks.
DATE OF HIRE: Early October.
JOB DESCRIPTION: Supervisor of Fairbanks Office. Requires demonstrated ability, strong communication skills, and knowledge of civil rights laws. Full job description at Human Rights Commission, Fairbanks.
Send State application form and sample of written work to: Julia Winegarden, 2457 Arctic Blvd., Anchorage, AK 99503
CLOSURE DATE: Sept. 17, 1976.

VACANCY ANNOUNCEMENT

Alaska Federation of Natives, Inc. is currently accepting applications for the position of Director, Alaskan Economic Development Office. Salary is DOE.
Duties and responsibilities are as follows:
1. Directing staff in providing financial assistance, professional services, and technical aid for potential minority entrepreneurs;
2. Administration and management of funds allotted by the U.S. Department of Commerce for the AEDO program.
3. Development of specific packages designed to aid minority contractors, businesses and individuals;
4. Periodic monitoring and evaluation of AEDO's progress;
5. Implementation of training seminars designed to impart skills to minority entrepreneurs.
Send resume or application to Gordon Jackson, Vice President, AFN, Inc., 550 W. 8th Avenue, Anchorage, Alaska 99501.
Recruitment to close on September 6, 1976.

News briefs...

THE INTERNATIONAL Pacific Halibut Commission announced that the halibut fishing season in Area 2 (California to Southeastern Alaska) will close at 6 a. m., Sept. 8, 1976.

TWO YOUNG MEN from Ft. Richardson will run to Seward next Friday to raise money for Muscular Dystrophy and Hope Cottage.

The idea for the 135-mile run was contrived by Privates William M. Vaughn, 17, of Chandler, Ariz., and Joseph A. Richards, 20, of New York City. They are presently hunting for sponsors and donations.

A SALMON HATCHERY loan totalling \$600,000 has been approved by the state for the Prince William South Aquaculture Corp. at Cordova. The loan is the first to be approved under the state hatchery loan program which went into effect June 19.

JIM EDENSO, a Native Alaskan, has been appointed deputy commissioner in charge of the Treasury Division. One of Edenso's major duties will be planning for the establishment of the Permanent Fund which will be on the ballot in the November general election.

Edenso was born and raised in Craig, on Prince of Wales Island.

THREE ALASKAN natives have filed suit in Fairbanks demanding that the U.S. government cancel an 8.9 million acre land withdrawal which sets aside property for the proposed Rampart Canyon power project.

The plaintiffs, Herman Joseph, David Stevens and William Carlo Sr. are trying to obtain title to land inside the withdrawal under terms of the Alaska Native Allotment Act. The case tests federal authority in

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withdrawing the land, the timing of the withdrawal and methods used in determining whether applicants under the allotment program meet length of use requirements.

THE UNIVERSITY Board of Regents will hold its next meeting Sept. 24-25 at the Kuskokwim Community College in Bethel.

The meetings are scheduled to commence 9 a.m. each day. It is the board's policy to meet in various communities around the state to gain an awareness of local needs and problems.

RESIDENTS OF THE Ester Dome area near Fairbanks have again been cautioned by state authorities not to drink water from local wells. Recent laboratory tests confirmed earlier reports of high concentrations of arsenic in many residents' home water supplies.

Hair, fingernail and urine samples recently collected from 25 people living in the Ester area were also found to contain elevated concentrations of arsenic. Abnormally high levels of the chemical were first detected in the area's well water by a University of Alaska graduate student doing research for a thesis.

EWE SHEEP permits for the Tok Management Area will be available from the Tok Fish and Game office beginning Aug. 23, the Dept. of Fish and Game announced last week.

Permits must be picked up in person during normal business hours at the Fish and Game office in Tok, said Tok Area Biologist Larry Jennings.

THE UNIVERSITY of Alaska is the recipient of three grants totalling more than \$34,000 by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

STATE OFFICIALS have warned a visiting delegation from the U.S. Dept. of Interior that Alaskan coastal villages cannot cope with the growth impact of the Outer Continental Shelf oil and gas leasing program.

According to Kevin Waring, director of planning for the Department of Community and Regional Affairs, "These coastal villages don't have any planning departments, no zoning, no nothing. They keep their records in shoe boxes. They are absolutely incapable of handling it."

ESKIMO LEADERS and federal officials met in Barrow last week to discuss a mutual concern: survival of the subsistence lifestyle during further development of Alaska's oil rich North Slope.

The federal delegation, headed by Assistant Interior Secretary Jack Horton, is seeking native assistance in the department's June 1977 takeover of the 23 million acre Naval Petroleum Reserve No. 4. The delegation has promised prevention of environmental damage and disruption to the subsistence lifestyle during the exploration and development of the reserve.

A PARTICIPANT in the federal government's Outer Continental Shelf environmental assessment program, the University of Alaska, is now conducting 29 different research projects at a total cost of about \$3 million a year.

These totals vary somewhat as existing projects come to an end and new projects get underway, explained Donald H. Rosenberg, who in addition to his regular duties as director of the Alaska Sea Grant program coordinates the university's OCS research.