

Meeting basic employment and other human needs

Note: The Tundra Times is reprinting the Alaska Natives Commission Report over the next several months.

The Situation

So-called "welfare" programs have become a cruel irony for the Native community, turning many Alaska Natives into virtual economic wards of government.

Much of the blame for the current situation stems from persistent unemployment found throughout village Alaska, together with the loss of control of local resources and local decision-making processes.

Most of the relatively few jobs available in many parts of rural Alaska are externally subsidized public service positions occupied, more often than not, by transient or permanently resident non-Natives. The lack of opportunities for productive labor and earned income, and the loss of self-respect that comes with reliance on others for providing the basic necessities of life, are important causal factors in the epidemic of social problems afflicting Alaska Natives and their communities.

Values that once enabled Alaska Natives to meet their own and each others' needs through hard work and close familial and communal sharing and support systems have been severely eroded. Roles have changed and the villages have splintered into tiny family units, dependent not on other members of the tribe, but on the government. A sense of pride and strength has been replaced by a lack of self-esteem and feelings of helplessness.

Welfare programs have, in some cases, become an addiction. The programs have completed the breakdown of healthy village and familial interdependence. Even worse, an unhealthy dependence on government has led to an acquiescence about critical decisions and a reliance on outsiders to solve problems.

Barriers that stand in the way of employment opportunities for Alaska Natives must be overcome. At the same time, current income maintenance and family assistance programs must be restructured. Eventually, the programs should be dismantled.

Recommendations

1. Increased local Native employment opportunities, culturally appropriate service delivery, and local decision-making and management skills should be enhanced through expanded contracting of government programs and services to Native governments and other Native providers in predominantly Native areas of the state.

Discussion

The slow but steady evolution towards a system of contracting government services to institutions controlled by rural and Native people is providing employment opportunities once virtually inaccessible to many people in rural Alaska. That system, though not flawless, is also bolstering self-determination efforts for Native people statewide by developing the means for localized, grass-roots problem solving and service delivery.

The State of Alaska should enter into cooperative service delivery agreements with Native organizations and governments with clear procedures for contracting those institutions. As a matter of policy, the State should contract with Native organizations and governments where there is a proven capability to manage programs and account for program funds. State programs and initiatives that impact the social and physical well-being of Native individuals, families and tribes in village Alaska should become universal contracting. These include, but are not limited to, the following: employment assistance, child protective services, social and family service, and alcohol and mental health programs.

With respect to federal funds and con-

tracting, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Indian Health Service and other federal agencies need to continue the process of decentralizing and contracting programs eligible for inclusion under P.L. 93-638, as amended. In this same light, regional Native non-profit associations should move money, authority and responsibility to the villages. These institutions need to work with tribal governments to review significant shifts in programs and services from the regional to the sub-regional and village level. Ultimately, the local employment and tribal empowerment needs in the villages should be balanced with the realities of providing cost-effective, quality services throughout rural Alaska.

Given the superior record Native organizations have in recruiting and hiring Natives compared with the federal government, the Alaska Natives Commission recommends that Native organizations and governments contract all federal functions currently available for contracting under P.L. 93-638, as amended.

2. At a minimum, every federal agency with programs eligible for contracting under terms of P.L. 93-638, as amended, should have a Native hire requirement similar to that which is in place with the Indian Health Service and the Bureau of Indian Affairs; further, all federal departments with job classifications located in rural Alaska should be required to maintain Native preference in hiring to ensure that, at a minimum, the proportion of Native employees corresponds to the proportion of Natives in the population of the immediate area.

Discussion

The federal government employs close to 20,000 people in Alaska. With two exceptions - the Indian Health Service (IHS) and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) - a wide disparity exists between Alaska Natives as a percentage of the state's population (16%) and their representation in the federal work force (5% not including the IHS and BIA). The key factor distinguishing the IHS and the BIA from other federal departments is a special Congressional approved Alaska Native hiring preference. Federal agencies not under the terms of the Native hire provision - which includes most of the agencies operating in Alaska - seem unable to employ Alaska Natives in meaningful numbers. Expanding Native hire provisions to other agencies within the federal system should result in substantial new job opportunities of Alaska Natives.

The Commission was unable to collect detailed figures pertaining to Alaska Native hire in federal jobs located in predominantly Native areas of the state. The generally low percentage of Alaska Native in the work force in Alaska clearly indicates, however, that the ratio of federal Native hires in these areas is quite low, especially considering the high percentage of Alaska Natives in the rural population. For instance, in the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) passed in 1980, Congress directed the Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture to institute Native and local preference in a number of programs related to the Conservation Systems Units established by the Act. None of these has been followed even though the Conservation Units are located in rural Alaska and most are in proximity to predominantly Native communities. Congress should revisit ANILCA with respect to Native and local hire provisions and establish legislative directives to the federal administration for purposes of enforcing the mandates of ANILCA. Oversight that can ensure implementation of the mandates should be ongoing, and

should include representation from statewide, regional and local Native organizations and corporations.

3. Limits to local Native participation in capital improvement projects - including hiring and wage rules that work counter to local Native employment needs - must be overcome to ensure employment opportunities for village residents in public works planning, design and construction in villages.

Discussion

Most capital projects in village Alaska are contracted to urban-based companies, or to companies based outside Alaska. As is the case with respect to so many aspects of Alaska Native existence, local people become merely passive recipients of the airports, roads, clinics and houses constructed for their benefit. The true economic benefits of construction activities go to businesses and to workers and their families in Anchorage, Fairbanks, Seattle and other points south. More often than not, healthy young Native people in the village literally watch from their front doors as others from far away places earn wages on projects intended to benefit Natives.

The federal and state governments should use force accounting on all village capital projects to open opportunities for local labor and talents in the planning, design and construction of these projects. Also, the federal and state governments should apply the federal Davis Bacon Act and the Alaska "Mini-Davis Bacon" effectively and rationally in conformity with the statutory rule of the local prevailing wage.

The Alaska Natives Commission has, in various reports, documented the projected public works and housing needs that could lead to significant future wages of capital expenditures in rural Alaska. To the extent such expenditures are forthcoming, every effort must be made to ensure that Native people are designing and constructing the homes, putting in the sewer and water systems that will service those homes, building new community facilities, and repairing and maintaining those already in place.

4. Limits to local Native participation in rural Alaska resource production and extraction industries must be clearly identified and overcome to ensure employment opportunities for village residents, expanded economic benefits for rural economies, and avenues for Native involvement generally.

Discussion

In general, the history of resource development in Alaska resembles colonialism at its finest: i.e. economic "activity" consists largely of extracting raw resources from Alaska's lands and waters. In far too many cases, local Native employment opportunities in the extraction phase are marginal, as are secondary or tertiary economic benefits to local economies.

A noteworthy exception is the Community Development Quota (CDQ) program under which some 62 communities in western Alaska share in the royalties on the Bering Sea pollock fisheries. The positive effects resulting from the infusion of economic and social support and assistance - including local employment opportunities created by the CDQs - are only now beginning to be realized. There are indications that the long term rewards will have a major impact on the coastal Native communities in western Alaska. At the same time, the Commission sees the potential for CDQ-type approaches in other extraction industries, in addition to fishing. What is of greatest importance to policy makers is the need to look more broadly at the full range of economic development opportunities in all future re-

source development activities taking place in rural Alaska.

5. Federal and State regulations must be changed to allow for tribal design and management of government income support and maintenance programs, most notably: Aid to Families with Dependent Children, Food Stamps, State General Assistance, and the federal General Assistance program funded under the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Discussion

What is generally viewed as a social "safety net" in contemporary American life has become more of a solid base from which many Alaska Natives now live their lives. Historically, Alaska Natives were a people capable of meeting their own and each other's needs through close familial and communal sharing and support systems. In modern times, an ever increasing number of Native villages and families have become virtual economic wards of the federal and state governments. This is due mainly to the chronic unemployment situation in much of village Alaska together with the loss of control of local resources and local decision-making processes.

While financial assistance is necessary until the rural areas of Alaska become economically viable, there is a critical need to restore pride and self-esteem to Alaska Natives and a sense of community purpose to the villages. Unless real changes are made to the current system of income maintenance and financial support programs in Native communities, the overall well-being of Alaska Natives will continue to deteriorate.

6. Utilizing government transfer pay-

ment receipts, tribal governments in Alaska should be permitted to design and implement local "workfare" programs that require productive community development employment where aid-eligible households have at least one able-bodied, employable member. Village workfare programs should be designed to provide adequate training, child care and other support services for participants.

Discussion

To the extent "welfare" programs are restructured as proposed in the foregoing discussion, the potential benefits to working members of households and their families are incalculable. Not only would there be a restoration of pride and self-esteem among individuals and families, but workfare programs could be fashioned to benefit communities by providing needed labor for, as examples, building and maintenance projects, and village planning and management.

There are any number of village projects toward which workfare funds can be directed, many of them related to improving the overall cleanliness and orderliness of communities. Others relate to increasing the ability of communities to manage and maintain village infrastructure, and improve local government administration. The money can also be used to augment educational and health service programs.

By offering a viable and honorable interim solution to the need for meaningful employment in village Alaska, such a move by government would complement various prevention, education and village healing efforts proposed in other sections of this report.