

WRONG ENROLLMENT FORM

Scores of Alaska Natives May Have Enrolled on Wrong Claims Form

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With only sixteen days left before final deadline for enrollment in the Alaska Native Land Claims Settlement, it appears that scores of Alaska natives may have enrolled on the wrong forms.

The form in question was put out in 1970 and 1971 prior to the final settlement by the Alaska Federation of Natives. It was designed to enlist membership in the AFN and also to determine approximately how many Alaska Natives would be receiving benefits under the Act.

The confusion arose because the form was headed with the title —“ENROLLMENT FORM”. It has spaces for name, address, etc., and asked the applicant to state whether he was Eskimo, Indian, or Aleut, and what percentage. The applicant was asked to send in a dollar if he had it, but if not, was told the application would be accepted anyway.

Hundreds and hundreds of Alaska natives “enrolled”, believing they were enrolling for land claims. The forms were scattered widely for distribution throughout the state, going to many native organizations.

Even as late as a month ago,

the erroneous forms were being mistakenly handed out in some places as official enrollment forms, but the majority were filled out in 1971 and mailed in to the AFN.

Due to internal difficulties within the troubled AFN, there may be some difficulty in tracing down all the records and files relating to the AFN Enrollment. New Executive Director John Shively had no knowledge of the mix-up until late Friday.

“I was completely unaware of the situation,” said Shively. “But we will now make every effort to search out the forms and notify people.”

Later in the day, Shively had been able to determine that several boxes of the forms had been turned over to the Enrollment Office for cross-checking and reapplication.

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Whether more boxes exist is not known and "Everybody's unclear on what was done with those were turned over after they were supposedly cross-checked," Shively added.

In addition to making every effort to locate the complete files and notify applicants they must reapply with the official BIA Enrollment Office, AFN said they would take the position that in the event the files are not located in time to meet the deadline, AFN will petition the Department of the Interior to accept the AFN form as a preliminary form for enrollment, signifying "intent to apply" with full right of appeal.

Enrollment Coordinator John Hope in Anchorage said his office was aware that there had been some mix-up over the forms and he added that there has been a similar confusion in southeast Alaska over the Tlingit-Haida enrollment.

Many persons who enrolled for the Tlingit-Haida settlement which pre-dated the all-Alaska settlement believed that they, too, were officially enrolled for all benefits under the later Act.

Hope called attention to another critical problem facing the Enrollment Office in the short space of time remaining. With 71,008 Alaska Natives enrolled as of February 25, 1973, processors are encountering many, many forms that are incomplete, either because of an error or a missing fact.

"In many cases," said Hope, "we don't have all the information we need to process the form. There may be only one or two items missing, but we have to pull the whole form and then try to locate the applicant. Until we do, they are not enrolled. The problem is that many of the people move and fail to notify us."

Unfortunately, in nearly all rural areas, there are no longer any local enumerators available to help people correct forms or to reapply. They must do it by mail or come into a larger area. Fairbanks has no enumerator.

There is one woman who is temporarily in charge of enrollment. If she is out of the office, an applicant is told that no one else can help them.

Enrollment in the Fairbanks BIA office was relegated to so unimportant a position that the switchboard operator did not know what it was and connected a phone inquiry to the education department, thinking the caller meant school enrollment.

Fairbanks has one serious problem with a large group of applicants whose forms have apparently been lost by the BIA. Early in the enrollment, a group known as the Interior Eskimo Association, Inc. enrolled with the help of an official enumerator from the enrollment office.

The Interior Eskimos are comprised of Eskimo people who are living in the urban area of Fairbanks. However, many of them wished to enroll back to Eskimo home villages.

The enumerator, who had only recently completed a brief training period in the technicalities of enrollment, misinformed the group on an important point. They were told that although they could enroll themselves back to Barrow, for example, they must enroll their children in the Fairbanks area.

Alfreda Kushida, spokesman for the group, said that many of them were unhappy about this and eventually wrote letters to Anchorage and Juneau and discovered that they had been misinformed by the officials. They COULD enroll their children as well as themselves to their home villages.

All of the forms of the Interior Eskimo Association, Inc. people were pulled for re-examination and an Eskimo woman, Mable Peterson, was hired to assist in making reapplication.

However, many of the people, had moved and in the time for which she was hired, it was impossible to find and notify all the people who had originally filed.

She completed all of the forms of people still in the Fairbanks area and those she was able to reach.

The day her job expired, she conferred with her superior on what to do about those who had not been contacted, and was told to leave the forms on the desk. When she last saw them, that is where they were.

Months later, someone thought to check and see if the names of all the Interior Eskimo Association, Inc. people had been reprocessed. The master, up-to-date IBM print out sheet from the Anchorage Enrollment Office was checked.

Missing were the names of all those whose applications were part of the group left on the desk. To date, all of these applications have still not been found and reentered.

Their original applications were filed in good faith and in error only by virtue of misinformation on the part of the BIA. Ms. Kushida said the

situation raises the question what happens when an application is lost by the Enrollment Office, either by the enumerator, dropped behind a file cabinet, or misplaced on the wrong desk.

The applicant receives no carbon copy to document the fact that he has, indeed, submitted application.

Two men were sent up from Anchorage office to investigate the missing forms. Ms. Kushida urged them to "get on the radio stations, on television, to spend some money and buy ads in the local newspapers publishing a list of the names of those they were trying to locate."

"But they wouldn't do it," she said.

In sixteen days, it may be an impossible task to unravel the AFN form mix-up and to locate all the people who have filed incomplete forms and then disappeared, with no forwarding address.

John Hope, Enrollment Coordinator for the entire operation, said it does not appear that there will be an extension of time granted. "The Department of the Interior has taken a firm position that there will be no extension of the deadline."

How do you know if you're officially enrolled and that your form has the necessary information on it and that it hasn't been lost or misplaced?

Hope said all persons enrolling should receive an eligibility statement within four weeks of submitting application. If anyone has NOT received confirmation that his form has been processed and that he is enrolled, he should notify the local BIA, the Enrollment Office in Anchorage, or the regional corporation immediately.

Anyone who filed an Alaska Federation of Natives Enrollment Form or a Tlingit-Haida form, must reapply on an official Bureau of Indian Affairs Alaska Native Enrollment Form before March 30.

Hope had no idea how many persons had submitted applications on AFN form. The Enrollment Office moved once during its operation said Hope and some files were misplaced in the shuffle. "We're still finding some (AFN) forms in the files from time to time, mixed in with something else."

"The Enrollment Office will be determining right up to December 31 the eligibility of applicants," he explained. "This is the purpose of the time between March 30 and December 31." If an applicant has just a name and address in, he will be considered as having made application and eligibility can then be determined.

An Alaska Native who has not applied has only sixteen days left in which to do so, unless the Secretary of the Interior makes a judgement that the time frame is not sufficient to clear up the present confusions.

If an extension is not granted, cases such as that of the Interior Eskimo Association, Inc. foreshadow a rash of lawsuits and deluge of last-minute paperwork and protests swamping the Enrollment Office in Anchorage.