

Everyone can participate in sobriety

by Maj. Gen. John Schaeffer
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We enter this New Year with a sober look at the future.

Many of the young men and women who serve in the Alaska National Guard are Alaska Natives from rural villages. The Guard gives them the opportunity to do something worthwhile, but just because they occasionally put on a uniform does not make them less susceptible to the problems faced by other Alaska Natives.

We pay them for the work they do. It does help, but unfortunately it also gives them money to buy booze and drugs.

Inupiat Paitot
People's Heritage

OPINION

This isn't our intention, but this is what happens. Regrettably, our laws, enforcement actions and treatment centers are not sufficient in themselves to prevent substance abuse.

At the 1988 Alaska Federation of Natives Convention we spoke of a vision — our goal of sovereignty. I believe our vision is correct, but we must solve some problems first. One of our biggest obstacles is alcoholism.

Alcoholism is a sickness that affects the lives of all Alaskans, Native and non-Native. No matter what your goals in life, no matter what your aspirations for your family, alcoholism hampers your ability to achieve them. It ultimately destroys the individual and the family.

How many of you are alcoholics? I don't mean the guys that drink continuously and never go home, the kind we automatically classify as "drunks."

I'm thinking of the other kind of

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alcoholic, which is what too many Alaskans are. We think we can handle it because we only drink on weekends or for special occasions.

We're still doing our jobs and taking care of our families, but the problem is that we get a drink and we can't stop — or we can't stop until we have too much.

Drinking was starting to become a problem in my life, so I quit. I stopped drinking for myself, my family and to set an example for others.

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Organizations such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving, Alcoholics Anonymous and Adult Children of Alcoholics help. But we have a long way to go.

I'd like to see our society treat drinkers the same way it behaves toward smokers; liquor is a far more dangerous substance than cigarettes. Let's make people feel it's their choice

to drink, but that to do so is unhealthy and undesirable.

I think it's going to take people who are not alcoholics to say no to liquor in social settings in order to establish a sobriety trend in this country. Your saying no makes it easier for the alcoholic to say no.

We need family involvement and support in our alcoholism treatment programs. A few are beginning to, but the vast majority still treat the alcoholic and then send him or her home to an environment which promotes drinking.

Even those programs which treat family members don't go far enough because the alcoholic still must confront the community in which he lives. He may feel outcast at parties and have to deal with saying no to a social hour after work which includes a beer, or dinner parties which invariably include cocktails.

Alcoholism treatment programs should be designed to treat entire communities, especially in rural areas where problem drinking is the most prevalent. In order to initiate a suc-

cessful sobriety movement, individuals, government and private health care institutions will have to participate.

In your home it means serving non-alcoholic beverages, and perhaps keeping liquor in the back cabinet for those who request it. Visitors will get the impression that they are the exception, as with smokers in a restaurant who have been relegated to a small section near the back.

Government and quasi-government programs must be expanded or initiated which truly address the problems of entire communities. Alcoholism is the symptom of deeper problems which must be addressed holistically.

Working together, we can encourage healthier, happier lives for all Alaskans and make possible an environment in which people have a chance to reach their full potential. I believe we'll be surprised at the difference sobriety can make in our state.

We have a great future in front of us. We each have a stake in our own sobriety. Our commitment to a season of sobriety should begin with each new day in the New Year.

