

# Law enforcement changes urged

By LAURY ROBERTS  
Juneau Correspondent

The schism between "two separate and unequal" systems of Alaskan justice can be bridged through unique approaches to law enforcement in the bush. That's the message Kim Moeller, head of Barrow's Department of Public Safety, left with more than 40 Alaskan judges who recently gathered in Sitka.

Moeller delivered a pair of reports to participants at the Judicial Conference, both of which stressed the need to change traditional methods of law enforcement to fit the special circumstances of rural communities.

He warns his reader: "If the attitude of the whole criminal justice system of Alaska is to insure superimposed law-ways upon all areas of Alaska, regardless of cultural background or history, then the policy of public safety (which he advocates) is sheer heresy."

The reports released early this year, detail the attempts of the North Slope Borough to adequately protect its public through a "tri-service" plan and its response to life-threatening alcohol abuse by residents.

In both instances Moeller looked to local resources to implement unorthodox ideas.

## Challenge to the police role in rural Alaska

When Moeller took over the public safety duties in Barrow in 1976, he followed eight different chiefs of police who had come and gone in less than two years.

The turnover rate of officers who were usually untrained and unaccepted, was 500 percent annually. The jail facility was constructed of aircraft runway matting, and one state trooper was the main keeper of the law and order for thousands of square miles.

Villages near the "hub" community (where the trooper was likely stationed) suffered from no public protection at all and residents were sometimes forced to hide in safety from an intoxicated neighbor brandishing a firearm.

The initial step was to regionalize the public safety a first in the state for a municipality. It was also requested that the state trooper position for the area be eliminated.

The next, and probably most important move, was to adequately train officers — not only in appropriate law enforcement, in other services vital to bush communities: emergency medical treatment and fire protection. The "generalist" could serve the most basic needs of borough villages.

After a year, the tri-service regional plan was operative. But it took a

number of challenges to the traditional Anglo-Saxon mode of law enforcement.

Police must now be trained in fire and medical emergency response. They live in the village where they work and are encouraged to become full community members. The style of uniform is different (if it is worn at all), no metal badges are flashed and an officer's weapon is concealed, rather than flaunted as a reminder of authority.

Safety officers are required to be guided by the wishes of the elders on the village council. "Success in law enforcement is primarily dependent upon how much law is acceptable to a single community, and what is not acceptable. A community will only have as much law enforcement as they wish to have....," Moeller's report contends.

After the concept had been in effect one year Moeller concluded: "Modification by public safety in the North Slope has reached a mid-point between two rural law enforcement traditions. On the one hand, the tradition of the trooper image and the mysticism that accompanies it is rejected. On the other hand, the tradition of the T-shirts and jeans, quasi-police is also rejected. The point between has been modified to fit regionalization and the concept of public safety on the North Slope."

## Alcohol abuse and the police in rural Alaska

Not only did Moeller face a disorganized law enforcement system when he first arrived in the farthest north community, but also an Inupiat population faced with some serious social ills mostly related to alcohol abuse.

Barrow has alternately been a "wet" and "dry" town. But, with bootlegging considered a "socially acceptable pastime" there was no difference between a "wet" and a "dry" year as far as alcohol consumption is concerned, Moeller discovered.

(see LAW, page 9)

# • Law changes needed

(continued from page 8)

Following a change in the law which allow police to hold drunks if there is no medical facility, Moeller instituted a detention program for the protection of the community.

The program does not attempt to treat those with an alcohol problem, but rather to detain persons who might harm themselves or others while in a drunken state.

Officers underwent a two-week training period on how to handle persons who've had too much to drink and insure their safety while detained for up to eight hours in a cell. A information campaign was launched to tell the community about the new program.

Initially, there was little interest in the detention program by the officers and "major confusion existed".

Most crimes were committed by drunken individuals, as were deaths caused by house fires and suicides. "The scene was set for some solutions when unnatural deaths began to reach the level of natural deaths," Moeller reports.

For the past five years, public drunkenness has not been a crime. Those who have had too much to drink are turned over to a local medical facility instead, an option many rural communities did not have. There was a "reluctance to deal personally with people solely because they were intoxicated."

But, additional training sessions on the causes of alcohol abuse and how it effects the body helped, and the program got off the ground.

While many of those picked up returned again and again, by intercepting intoxicated persons the crime rate and accidental death rate substantially decreased, according to Moeller.

The report states that a shock to the criminal incidents of accidental justice system," Moeller says. "Fighting the root of the cause of a crime is far more profitable to communities than the actual investigation and resolution of crimes after the fact. The basis for such a tangent approach is the early recognition that traditional ways of solving the crime problem do not work."

"The model results coming from a detention program will no doubt come as