

# Alcohol abuse cries for long-term solution

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ST. GEORGE — More than a year ago, the Anchorage Daily News published an extensive series delving into the social tragedies of several Alaska villages. The series was called "A People in Peril."

## OPINION

### Unangan Tunukun The Aleuts Speak

The articles expounded on the sad and frightening events of individuals affected by alcoholism and drug abuse. The most poignant stories chronicled suicides of teenagers and young adults committed under the influence of alcohol and/or drug abuse.

While "A People in Peril" exposed many of the effects of chemical dependency on Alaska Natives, the series mentioned little about the delivery, or lack thereof, of mental health or chemical dependency programs to villages in rural Alaska.

Long before the series was printed, several communities along the Alaska's west coast initiated a move toward sobriety by adopting policies banning alcohol in their communities. The ban was incorporated to alleviate the increase of chemical dependency among Natives in their communities.

Unfortunately, what resulted is reminiscent of the American Prohibition. Bootleggers have developed black markets for alcohol and are selling liquor at exorbitant prices.

In essence, the ban exchanges one problem for another as was chronicled

in "A People in Peril." This booze-ban initiative, is a short-term solution.

In the past five years, violent crimes and suicides or suicide attempts have increased dramatically in the Aleutian/Pribilof region where I live. About three years ago, one resident murdered his two brothers while intoxicated, and recently a 7-year-old boy was assumed missing and was later found murdered in the village of St. Paul. Both these crimes were committed under the influence of alcohol.

Not every situation rivals the trauma of those above. Sometimes, an individual realizes he or she has a handicap and voluntarily seeks treatment at a rehabilitation center in Anchorage.

In most cases, though, individuals lack travel funds to seek treatment in Anchorage. A vicious cycle of events emerges. Unfortunately, the individual who has left for treatment in Anchorage returns home, and with no local support programs, begins abusing alcohol or drugs all over again.

Regional non-profit corporations, such as the Aleutian/Pribilof Island Association, attempt to bridge the gap by developing mental health and alcohol/drug abuse programs. But in most cases, the programs are not effectively reaching villages such as St. George.

The Aleutian/Pribilof Islands region has two counseling centers, one located in Unalaska and staffed by a mental health director serving the Aleutian region, and a counselor community advisor located at St. Paul, serving both St. George and St. Paul.

These two centers serve an estimated population of 9,000 people, of which 2,000 are Aleut.

The counselor stationed at St. Paul

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is required by the Aleutian/Pribilof Island Association to travel to St. George twice a year for on-site visits. These visits usually last a week, and while on St. George, the counselor is to assess any problems encountered by patients seen during his last visit. Only once every six months. A lot can happen in six months. For instance, an individual may have violated probation by drinking again.

If St. George is not receiving adequate mental health and support services from the regional non-profit corporation, I can only imagine what other villages throughout the state are having to cope with.

Luckily, St. George has not experienced social and economic problems as traumatic as those prevalent elsewhere in the state. If there are problems, community residents have been known to rally together to offer support.

I realize that self-determination is the key factor in initiating village support programs. Nevertheless, we must not overlook the fact that most villages cannot start the process of self-determination. The regional non-profit

corporations are not assisting them in the process.

Once the programs that are currently being managed by regional non-profits are analyzed for effectiveness, in terms of serving the villages in their regions, only then can we effectively begin to chip away at the social and economic problems plaguing rural Alaska.

By examining these factors, I feel that we can arrive at the halfway mark to the long-term solution to chemical dependency in rural Alaska.

What the series "A People in Peril" accomplished was public awareness of the high rate of alcohol and drug abuse in rural Alaska. Now, I think, is time to find solutions to these problems.

*Aleut/Inupiaq Eskimo Martha B. Malavansky wrote this piece in a class she attended via audioconference delivered to her on the Pribilof Islands from Kotzebue-based Chukchi College. She is an administrator for St. George's traditional council. Chukchi News and Information Service is a writing project of Chukchi College, a branch campus of the University of Alaska Fairbanks.*