

Communities develop positive activities

by Sen. John Binkley
for the Tundra Times

JUNEAU — Alakanuk, Anderson, Angoon and Levelock are setting up regional crisis lines. Exercise and fur sewing classes are being held in Selawik.

Elders in Levelock and Toksook Bay have been telling stories of the old days, about reindeer herding and survival among the elements. The Kotlik City Council is working on the community's teen center building.

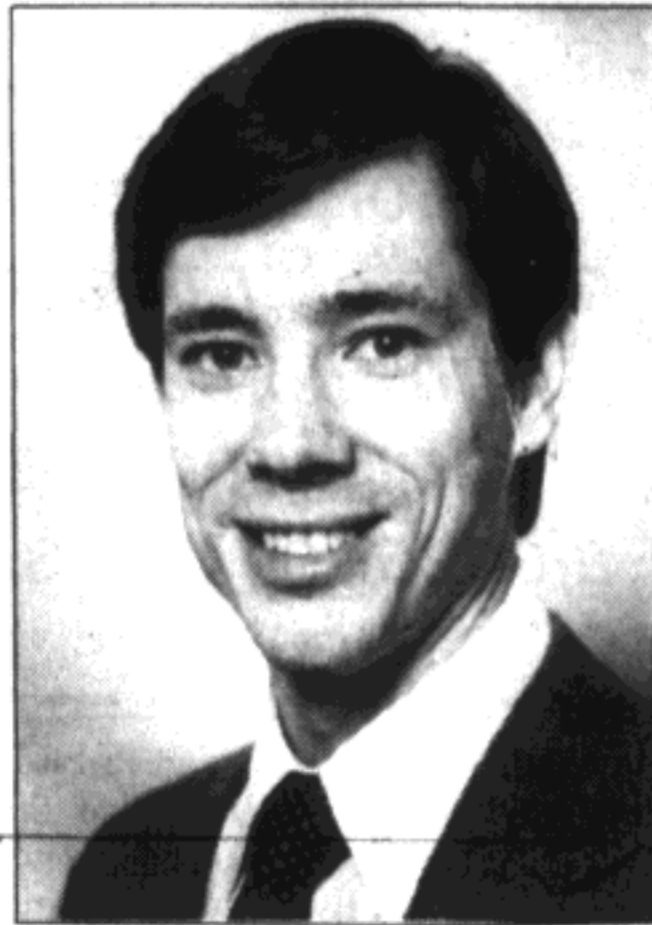
In Alakanuk, an elder-youth program is teaching parka making and sled building; youth attended a three-day retreat to discuss self-esteem building and understanding of the past.

In Metlakatla participants in a parent support group learned about "The Family Nurturing Circle."

Fifty-five communities have been awarded funds for the coming fiscal year to operate programs like these. They are part of a special state-funded grant program called the Community Based Suicide Prevention Program.

It was created last year in response to a finding by the Senate Special Committee on Suicide Prevention that the problem of suicide "is rooted in complex stresses that exist within rural communities, cultures, families and individuals" and that the efforts by "outside experts" have too often proven ineffective.

The Legislature endorsed the findings of the report and last year provided funding (and again this year) for suicide prevention initiatives. The Community Based Suicide Prevention Program is designed to give local communities the maximum amount of power to design their own programs



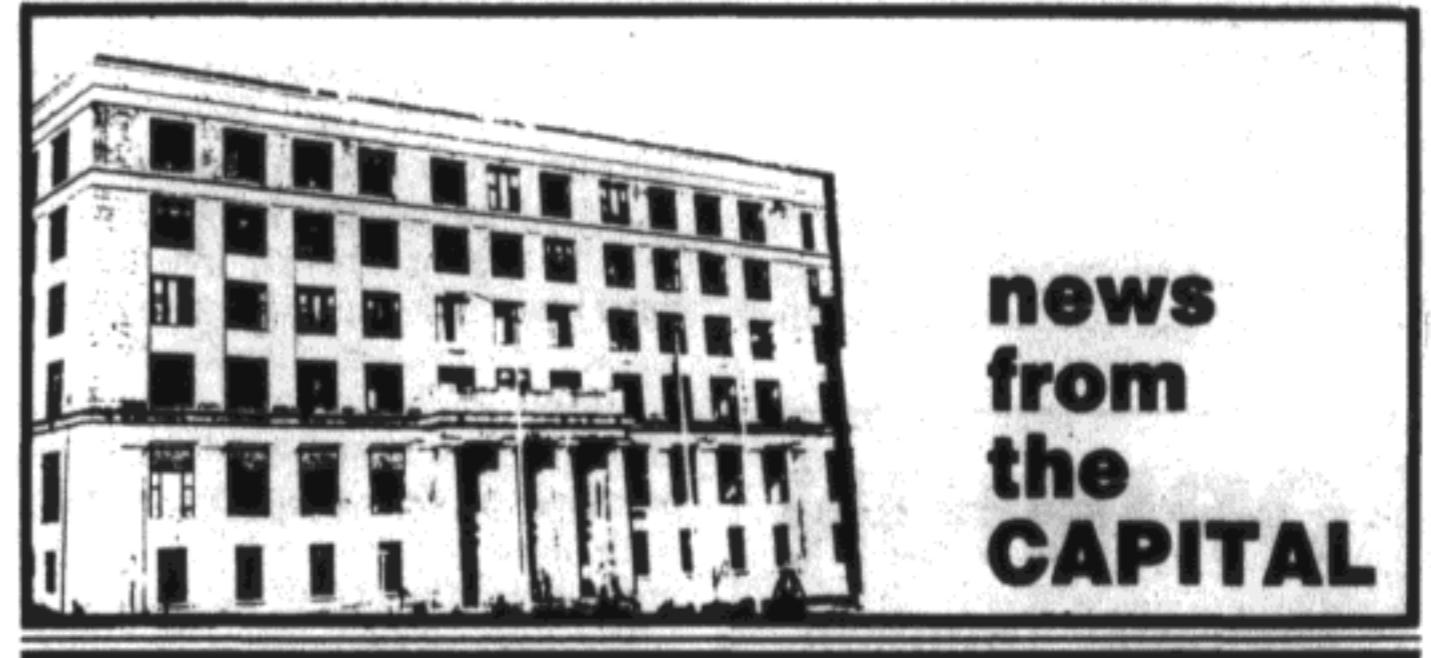
in suicide prevention and promotion of individual and community health.

A lot of what communities see as healthy activities revolve around cultural knowledge and pride, traditional skills and the importance of elder/youth communication. Overall, the programs have been tremendously successful in getting people working together.

The grants are not large, about \$14,000 per village, but often a community discovers that many healthy activities don't actually cost very much.

A welcoming tea for new teachers, for example, promotes good relations and communication between school personnel and community members.

Project villages are also learning from one another (village-to-village technical assistance) through regional workshops and meetings and by choosing a "sister" project for support.



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The program has developed a newsletter that tells about special activities outside resources and gives the names and phone numbers of directors working on specific projects.

Anyone who wishes to read about the community-based suicide prevention programs can request their name be added to the mailing list by writing to Susan Soule, Rural and Native Services Coordinator, Department of Health and Social Services, Box H-04, Juneau 99811.

Public testimony and research considered by the Senate Special Committee on Suicide Prevention indicated over and over again that the solutions to the problems of suicide will come from "inside-out," from those living with the problems.

Several of the project villages have had suicides or other traumatic losses of life over the past year. Each of these communities were able to address the loss and grief through healing circles, insuring the elders or trained adults were available to younger people, by keeping an eye on those who were most upset and by supporting family members and close friends.

It seems to be working — particularly in those communities that have a broad base of support and someone with good leadership skills to run the program. It seems to be working in communities where individuals have made a commitment to make changes that will make a difference, changes within themselves and changes within their community.