

VILLAGES ASK VISTA CHANGE

51 Lower Kuskokwim, Yukon Villages Want Major Reshuffling

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Criticism leveled at the VISTA program in Alaska increased this week as an organization representing 51 villages in the Yukon-Kuskokwim area joined several past and present VISTA volunteers in calling for major changes in the program.

In a resolution passed the first week of January, and released this week, the Association of the Village Council Presidents charged that "the VISTA program has shown itself to have no stated objectives; no organizational potential; no resources for the Native people to utilize and has at times acted contrary to the wishes, desires and stated needs of the people they serve."

Listing the 51 villages in the Yukon-Kuskokwim area, the association requested that the Office of Economic Opportunity terminate the existing VISTA fund for the listed non-profit corporation established by the association for that purpose.

The villages stressed that they want no new VISTA volunteers except through the administra-

tion of such a corporation.

The above position was taken in the wake of serious criticisms last week from eight past and present VISTA volunteers.

In a position paper released to the public, these volunteers called for a full investigation of VISTA Alaska, a new sponsor for the VISTA program in Alaska and the formulation of plans for the realization of local control.

Similar to the native association, they charged that the VISTA program had been directed "without regard to the expressed needs of the rural and urban poor."

In response, administrators of the program seemed to feel that the attack from the volunteers upon VISTA has been blown out of proportion because the opinions represented only eight out of about 170 volunteers in Alaska.

At the time the native association had not released its stand.

The administrators admitted that the current program in Alaska has its problems and discussed several changes that they hope to make.

As apparent from the resolution and the position paper, a major area of contention centers around the sponsorship and administration of the program.

In Alaska, unlike any other state, the VISTA program is sponsored by the State, because when the program was introduced in Alaska, the government was allegedly the only agency capable of administering the program.

Under the current arrangement, the state pays the salaries of a secretary and co-ordinator William Allen and provides office space and a telephone. All other expenses are paid by the Office of Economic Opportunity.

The program itself is to be operated according to the VISTA guidelines from OEO, not according to policies of the state government.

In the eyes of Jerry White, the director of OEO for Alaska, the current program is one of local control, contrary to the

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opinion of the eight volunteers.

In the villages, the volunteers work for the village councils, White explained, and the village council has the authority and responsibility to guide and direct the activities of the individual.

However, Allen expressed some doubt as to whether the village councils realize and understand their power of control over the volunteers.

In many cases, they probably do not understand, he continued, because the volunteer leaders have not adequately explained the relationship to them.

The volunteer leader, having served a year in a village in Alaska, spends a second year in the field giving support to a VISTA district.

According to Allen, a Tlingit Indian, the volunteer leaders, after living in only one village, lack the necessary understanding and knowledge of an entire region.

Natives feel and approach things differently from outsiders, he said.

Having recently fired its last volunteer leaders, VISTA does not plan now to hire any more, the co-ordinator added.

Instead, it is seeking permission to reprogram unused funds to hire three supervisors who are native Alaskans or Alaskan natives. The program recently hired its first supervisor, Leonard Monaghan, and, according to Allen, needs a total of about nine.

Supervisors, he explained, are responsible for a region or district as the volunteer leaders were, but, unlike the volunteers, are not required to have served in VISTA for one year.

In addition to the current sponsorship, another criticism aimed at the program has been the slowness of the State with OEO funds to pay volunteer's bills, resulting in embarrassment for volunteers in the vilalges.

On this count, Monaghan said that the delay is due to the regional office in San Francisco, not the state.

For example, he said, VISTA just received the check last month for the program starting July 1, he added.

Anotehr area of controversy

has concerned the firing of a VISTA volunteer in the Eskimo village of Kongiganak, one of the villages signing the resolution calling for local control.

Having served in the village in 1968, Blanche Andrews requested permission to stay on a second year there. Her request was at first denied because it was a policy to let volunteers stay in a village only one year.

According to the position paper, the village council had also requested—to no avail—that Miss Andrews be allowed to stay on to continue her work in education in the village.

Only after a letter appeared in the Tundra Times denouncing the fact that VISTA seemingly had ignored the village's request was Blanche Andrews requested to stay another year.

However, she was later fired on Jan. 15, because, Allen said, she had acted irresponsibly.

She had written a letter asking volunteers "to strive toward local control," according to the position paper written by the volunteers.

Also, about a week earlier, three volunteer leaders, Christopher Cooke, John Godfrey, and Frank Pommersheim were fired because, according to Allen, their attitude and bahavior expressed in correspondence to other volunteers was negative and not in the best interests of the program. These three, along with volunteers Jeffrey and Ruth Ann Smith and Anne Murnane and past VISTA volunteers, Joli Morgan and Spike Stein, signed the position paper titled "A Series of Events in VISTA Alaska."

"We welcome disagreement," Allen said, "but not in a disagreeable manner. The volunteers do not need to inject seeds of distrust for the state, VISTA, or the administration. We need to work together or we are going to falter."

The complaints, he said, should have been registered directly with him, not with other volunteers or with villagers.

Personnel controversies such as the recent ones could largely be avoided, Allen indicated, with better recruitment and more adequate training.

A great percentage of the volunteers in the state do not request to be assigned to Alaska, the coordinator said.

He suggested that the administrators of the Alaska program have a greater voice in selecting its volunteers, that volunteers from Alaska be recruited in addition to native volunteers now serving in their villages, and that VISTA become a two-year, rather than a one-year program.

The volunteers currently undergo three weeks of training in Oregon and one week in Anchorage. Allen recommended that the entire training session be held in Alaska and that it concentrate more on the cross-cultural area so that the volunteers will better understand the natives.

Also, White said, we need to confine the program to a realistic goal and are thinking of concentrating on the area of education.

Education seems to be one of the biggest needs of the villages and the administration could better provide training and support for one project than it can for 57 projects.