

Bethel Housing Having Difficulties

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The sailing has not been smooth for a 200-unit Bethel Housing Project sponsored by the Alaska State Housing Authority, and, according to a spokesman of the agency, the

rough waters are due primarily to a lack of training programs for the new residents.

Suppose for a minute that an urban person living in Bethel were removed from his comfortable home and placed in one of the nearly 70 subsistence villages in the Bethel area.

His first months there would probably be difficult. He would reach for the light switch only to find a bare wall and would look for water facets only to find a bucket for hauling water from a nearby stream. And how was he to preserve food since there was

no electricity and thus no refrigerator? And how could he keep a fire going in the old wood stove? Furthermore, what was he going to eat? There was no store in the village, and he had no idea how to snare a rabbit or fish through the ice for sheefish. And what about a job? There wasn't much of a demand for his accounting skills in the village.

Thus, unless one of the villagers takes time to teach him the ways of his new environment he may find the going very rough at first.

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And, so possibly have those in a reverse situation—natives leaving their village and moving to Bethel, and, in particular, to a modern housing project there.

Without adequate orientation and training, the residents might have difficulty caring for and operating the combination heating and cooking oil stove, properly maintaining the modern house with electricity and running water, and budgeting money in order to make a monthly payment and have enough for food afterwards.

Completed this spring, the 200 houses were built in a nearby prefabrication plant, and are designed to sleep five or six but can accommodate about 10 if necessary. A water and sewer system for the project was installed by the Public Health Service and electricity by a local company.

Training for new people moving into the Bethel housing project has been very haphazard, said John Shively, deputy director of RurAL CAP.

He explained that, with money from RurAL CAP, the Bethel Housing Committee, composed of both home owners in the housing project and interested citizens, is responsible for hiring a staff to administer the housing program locally. These staff members are to hold training courses for the new residents.

However, Shively explained, they are also supposed to collect monthly payments and applications for housing and in other ways administer the program.

And the director, counselor, bookkeeper, secretary, and maintenance man hired as the staff found most of their time tied up simply with administrative details.

Also, Shively continued, the project had four directors in one year and, at times, no director at all. Thus, the training program was hindered by the resulting confusion and by the lack of continuity in management.

Problems in the housing project have included three fires, charges from residents and prospective residents that monthly payments are too high, and improper care for the houses.

Discussing these problems in his Anchorage office, Harold Grindle, assistant director of the Alaska State Housing Authority (ASHA), said that the new residents needed instruction in finance, budgeting, hygiene, child care and home maintenance and repair. In addition, there needed to be a nutrition course geared to foods available in the area, not to foods in the lower 48.

But perhaps one of the biggest problems is the fact that 100 of the 200 homes are still standing empty when natives in Bethel badly need new housing.

According to a report on Bethel prepared by ASHA, of 370 dwelling units in existence in the city before the housing project, 250 were termed unfit for human habitation. With its 200 new units, ASHA expected to house nearly 40 per cent of the community's 2,000 people and eliminate much of the use of substandard housing.

The community of Bethel is really down on the housing project, Shively explained. Many of the residents feel, he added, that too many of the plans were made by ASHA before the Housing Committee was brought into the picture.

Also, the three fires, one of which was fatal, have made people hesitant to move in, he continued. Two of them might have been prevented with training in the use of the oil cook stove, the RurAL CAP spokesman added.

Grindle, too, seemed to feel that the empty units were, in part, due to the adverse publicity the project had received. He also contended that the complaints of a few had been blown out of proportion.

Furthermore, he added, some of the people decided not to leave their shacks and move into the new homes. And, the housing authority overbuilt. The agency had expected the regional high slated for construction in Bethel to be completed by now, Grindle said.

Concerning the charges of high monthly payments, according to ASHA's Comprehensive Plan on Bethel, the resident of each home pays about 20 per cent of his income for rent; the minimum is \$21 and the maximum is \$100 per month. At the end of 25 years the resident will receive title to the home.

A closer look at the native situation might indicate why some would feel the payments too high.

Many have migrated to Bethel from small subsistence villages in the area because of services offered in the city.

Today, nearly 90 per cent of the 2,000 people are Eskimo, according to the ASHA report. Many of these live in a combination money and subsistence economy and depend heavily on seasonal hunting and fishing in the area for survival. Job opportunities are few, and the median family income of the nonwhite is \$1,530 per year compared to \$8,120 for whites.

A 1967 Bureau of Indian Affairs survey indicated that in the Bethel region only 17.4 per cent of the native males and 10.4 per cent of the native females of working age had either permanent or temporary employment and the bulk of this employment was temporary or seasonal.

Concerning ways to correct many of the problems encountered in the housing project, Shively said that RurAL CAP is encouraging the Housing Committee to look closely into the problems and to solve them.

The committee, he said, had primarily been leaving the administration up to the staff that it had hired.

RurAL CAP plans to give the committee all the assistance it needs and believes that the committee itself can solve the problems.

He added that ASHA has mentioned taking over the management of the project itself if the problems are not worked out.