

# Dependent Children Age Cut Off Extension Being Sought

Steps have been taken to force the State Welfare Department to extend the cut off age on benefits for dependent children to 21. Currently, under the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, benefits are paid only for children under 18 years of age who are still in school.

Contending that this practice is in violation of federal statutes, Alaska Legal Services filed a suit in Superior Court in Fairbanks last week seeking to compel the State to comply with the federal regulation.

According to attorney Lynn Asper with Alaska Legal Services

in Fairbanks, federal statute define a dependent child as one who is under 21 and a student regularly attending school.

The term school, he added, covers elementary and high school, college and university, and vocational or technical training designed to prepare the person for gainful employment.

The purpose of the federal regulation, he continued, is to encourage children of welfare recipients to finish school.

Asper explained that the main drive for the suit against the State Department of Welfare came from the bush. The suit, he added, was a class action and filed on behalf of all those families that would benefit under the federal statute.

Many children in the bush whose families are receiving welfare are late starting school, held back due to illness, or require an adjustment period when moving from the bush to attend a junior or senior high school, and are unable to graduate before they

reach 18 years of age.

When benefits for them are cut off, finishing school becomes an even more difficult task. Often they are forced to quit and get a job.

Before filing the suit, Asper said that Alaska Legal Services contacted the State Welfare Department and asked it to extend dependent benefits to students under 21, but the department failed to respond.