

Commission studies problems of elderly

An elderly woman in Ninilchik has no floor but she does have holes in her roof. An elder from Yakutat testifies that in a medical emergency he can get transportation assistance to the hospital in Anchorage, but must find his own means of returning home following hospitalization. A senior in Togiak asks who can repair the rotted out floor he has just stepped through?

An eighty-year-old from Tetlin questions why his homemaker service is consistently reduced in the winter when help with wood chopping and carrying water is critical and increased in the late spring when available family members and improved weather lessen his need for the service.

Seniors in Juneau, Ketchikan, Nome, Anchorage, Kenai, Fairbanks and Dillingham state the need for more safe and affordable housing. These are but a few of the concerns expressed by Alaska's senior citizens to members of the Older Alaskans Commission during a recent series of public meetings.

These meetings are part of a year-long effort by the Older Alaskans Commission to prepare a comprehensive plan to guide its work. In carrying out its legal mandate to respond to the needs of older Alaskans through advocacy, service coordination and services administration, the Commission has sought to actively involve older Alaskans in setting the priorities for its efforts.

The series of community meetings brought to the Commission's attention the many basic problems older Alaskans continue to face in trying to get by on limited incomes. The plan will be completed on July 31, 1983.

The findings of the Commission's six regional forums and nine community meetings are summarized in a recently issued report. This report compares the views of meeting participants with the results of recent state and federal assessments of need.

Report findings indicate that despite Alaska's concerted efforts to address senior citizen needs, many basic needs remain unmet. These include safe and affordable housing, stable incomes, primary health care, safe water, indoor plumbing, help with heavy housework, purchasing adequate fuel for the winter, and information about existing services and assistance in using them.

Based on the findings, housing issues ranked as the number one concern of older Alaskans. Those living in cities and towns are seeking affordable rents and help with minor home repairs. Bush elders indicate a need for major repair work and the construction of more single family dwellings which are capable of operating efficiently in Alaska's extreme climate.

The need for continued state and federal support for build-

ing low-income housing ranked among the top three priorities at all six of the Commission's regional forums. Income and health issues also ranked high among the priorities.

Median incomes of Alaskans over age 65 are 40% less than those of younger Alaskans. However, in the meetings elders indicated that having security that the income they now have will not be reduced was of even greater concern. Commission members were told: "If I know how much I can expect to receive and know that it is not going to be reduced, I can manage."

Elders commented that the recent discussion of the possible reduction of Social Security benefits coupled with the potential reduction or elimination of the Alaska Longevity Bonus program have made income an overriding concern and source of worry. This is especially the case in Northwest Alaska where 66% of the elders are heavily dependent on the Longevity Bonus. As a woman in Nome put it: "Without the Longevity Bonus, how could I pay my \$400 a month winter heating and electrical bill?"

Access to such basic health care as a physician, nurse or health aide may be unavailable to the isolated Bush elder. For others, the major barrier to adequate health care is the ever

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increasing share of medicare costs they are expected to pay. According to a recent survey, nearly 50% of Alaskans over age 65 have had either no or only one contact with a health professional within the past year.

Factors noted as influencing the decision to seek medical care include the distance to adequate medical facilities, transportation costs, fees and the possibility of a prolonged separation from family and friends.

Other issues brought to the Commission's attention included the continuation of existing nutrition and senior center programs, cuts in services vital to enabling the elder to live independently such as transportation and homemaker programs, the high costs of electricity and fuel, and the need for long-term care facilities in

each region of the state.

Native elders noted the need for access to Native foods, language barriers, the importance of sustaining their cultural heritage and traditional values, and problems with subsistence restrictions which lead to elders retrieving their nets in stormy conditions and fishing at times when adequate drying is not possible.

The Commission's meetings with elders indicate that despite the availability of such benefits as the Pioneers' Homes, Longevity Bonus and modern senior centers, many older Alaskans lack the means to assure adequate fuel in the winter, enough to eat, decent housing and adequate medical care.

The plan is an initial step to bring together federal, state and local resources in the hope that the basic needs of every older Alaskan can be met.