

# AFN seeks solutions for Native problems

by Steve Pilkington

Tundra Times reporter

The Alaska Federation of Natives, after recently releasing a grim report of the cultural and economic plight facing rural Alaska, has started a list of ways federal, state and Native leaders can find solutions which, so far, have remained elusive.

The AFN status report — *A Call for Action* — compiles data from

numerous studies relating to rural issues such as alcoholism, suicide and faltering education and economic programs for Natives.

According to the report, the Native suicide rate is almost four times the national average, alcohol abuse has reached almost epidemic proportions and rural Alaska is facing increasingly limited economic opportunities.

"We put some major findings in

there," said Julie Kitka, executive vice president of AFN.

"But we purposely did not include a practical list of recommendations. We wanted to encourage discussions but not discourage those already working on solutions," Kitka said.

However, she said AFN is putting together a detailed list of concrete ideas for improvements. Although the list won't be finished until AFN has

received a thorough public response, so far the recommendations have been grouped into three parts.

The first and most important category is what Natives and existing groups, including the village and regional corporations, should do about the current social and economic crisis, Kitka said.

"It will involve changes in whole

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underlying attitudes and assumptions," she said, adding that the corporations could be vital to the process as long as they don't get territorial.

Supporting the current sobriety movement in rural villages is also a priority, she said. "There ought to be more recognition of what people are doing now."

Many of the current programs such as Rural Alaska Community Action Program, Head Start and Alaska Native Health Board programs will continue to be vital, she said.

The other two kinds of recommendations fall under state and federal support, Kitka said.

Short-term intervention with alcoholism and suicide must come first from within the Native community, she said, but long-term solutions can come from policymakers.

"That's going to be the difficult part because you're talking about changes in fundamental policy procedures," she said.

But much help is expected to come from Sen. Daniel Inouye, D-Hawaii, who is scheduled to hold hearings March 10 in Washington, D.C. Inouye has asked for some concrete recommendations, Kitka said.

Inouye, the chair of the Senate Select Committee on Indian Affairs, was in Alaska late last year where he heard about some of the major social issues facing Alaska Natives.

But the success of any state and federal recommendations which Natives make will depend on how willing the governor and federal policymakers will be to take action, she said.

AFN encourages people to write or call their office in Anchorage to get a copy of the report or to make recommendations for the March 10 hearing in Washington, D.C.