

# Legally blind Natives get help from organization

by *Tundra Times* staff

William Craig's eyesight failed steadily before the Sitka man finally acknowledged the problem and began seeking help. Now legally blind, he and about 20 other Alaska Natives have formed Alaska Native Blind, affiliated with Alaska Independent Blind (AIB), a statewide advocacy organization.

Craig says the group has its work cut out, with an estimated 2,000 blind Natives across Alaska,

many of whom have a poor understanding of their condition and the resources available to help them cope. These resources range from job retraining counseling and funding to special Social Security benefits and various forms of advocacy in the public and private sector.

"We're just basically getting started," Craig said. He explained that Alaska Native Blind has a three-part agenda: education, advocacy and legislative lobbying.

In the area of education, it is

important to clarify in the public mind the definition of legal blindness, which consists of less than a 20 degree field of vision, of vision that is only correctable to 2200. Furthermore, Craig says it is critical that people understand the high risk of blindness that exists for those with diabetes and alcohol abuse problems. He warned that diabetics who also drink are especially vulnerable to blindness and noted that the rate of diabetes among Alaska Natives is projected to rise sharply in the next 10-12

years. Craig wants to point people in the direction of existing services for the blind which are currently underutilized.

The advocacy agenda includes intervening with agencies or companies that violate state or federal laws prohibiting discrimination against blind persons.

"It (discrimination) is more prevalent than would be imagined. I found out the hard way," says Craig.

In the legislative arena, Craig said Alaska Native Blind will push

for the creation of an office of blind services in the governor's office to make the administration of services more efficient.

Alaska Native Blind is available to any eligible person regardless of economic circumstances, although Craig says outreach to village residents and street people is most critical. Readers with questions about Alaska Native Blind can call Alaska Independent Blind at 1-800-478-9998, or call Craig collect at 747-5917.