

Statistics show great improvement since 'dry' vote

by Anna M. Pickett
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November 1, 1994 - another history-making day for the residents of Barrow, a day when the sale, importation, and possession of alcohol became illegal.

It's been nearly eight months since Barrow bucked the odds and voted to ban alcohol completely from America's northernmost community. According to statistics, the results have been dramatic.

The Statistics: Health

According to the North Slope Borough, Department of Health and Social Services, alcohol abuse during pregnancy (also known as fetal alcohol exposure), the surrogate measure of fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) and fetal alcohol effect (FAE), has decreased from 43.2% to 9% for pregnancies in six North Slope Borough villages, including Barrow.

"It is unlikely that any public health intervention other than the Ban, which was community generated and made law by local referendum, could have had such a far-reaching health benefit in potentially reducing the incidence of FAS and FAE. If the present trend continues, the economic benefit of healthier and productive children will be in the millions of dollars," said a recent report issued by the department.

The following chart was provided by the Public Health Service Hospital in Barrow:



It is believed that the increase seen under Gastrointestinal Disorders is because some people are now sober enough to realize that they have an internal problem, and are now able to have that problem looked at by medical staff.

The Statistics: Safety

Between the period November -

April in the years 1993/4 and 1994/5, the North Slope Borough's Public
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Safety responses report shows dramatic declines in crime rates:

- Substance Related - 86% decrease
- Felony Assault - 86% decrease
- Misdemeanor Assault - 66% decrease
- Domestic Dispute - 26.6% decrease
- Minors Consuming Alcohol - 80%
- Driving While Intoxicated - 79% decrease
- Intoxicated Person Removal - 86% decrease
- Attempted Suicide - 34% decrease
- Noise Complaints - 63% decrease
- Fight - 61% decrease
- Detox - 88% decrease
- Overall Average of Responses - 68.69% decrease

Stumbling Blocks

"It's (Barrow) doing well," says City Mayor Don Long. "The people and the community have accepted it. The people are enjoying themselves. It's good to see people that have not worked before that are working now."

However, Long feels that the State judicial system is being unsupportive of the efforts made by the people.

"We gave them the tools to prosecute, but the district attorneys are

not following through to the extent they should," says Long. Long says the district attorneys receive their assignments from Fairbanks. Long believes that because Fairbanks is so far from the area, they don't have a real idea of the benefits of an alcohol ban, therefore, the priority to prosecute those who import alcohol into Barrow is low.

"It's like slapping their (bootleggers) hand and saying, 'Don't do that again,'" says Long.

While Long says he's not getting flack from anybody, he does notice that at least one avid opponent of the booze ban has attended many of the city council meetings.

"It looks like he's learning the ropes," says Long. "Maybe he'll try to run for mayor at the next election."

What's Being Said

Molly Pedersen a member of the

NSB Assembly, and co-chair of the North Slope Sober Life Movement says Barrow is better to look at these days.

"You don't see drunks in public places anymore.

The post office used to reek of alcohol from the drunks who sat around there. It's not like that anymore.

"There always used to be drunks who

would show up at Eskimo dances and had to be removed. The same was true during the week of the Christmas games. But there wasn't any of that last Christmas, and it seems like no one has to be taken out at the Eskimo dances anymore," says Pedersen. "The kids seem much happier, because their parents are sober and are spending time with them."

Samuel Simmonds, a retired Inupiaq Presbyterian minister concurs with Long.

"It has had a very good effect for a lot of us," says Simmonds. "Our own people who were drawn into drugs and alcohol are now realizing it is a better life without it. We have heard and seen people doing jobs and taking care of their families. They are enjoying life. It is a wonderful thing to see.

"It's good to see young people doing

positive things instead of looking for booze," Simmonds says. He added it will be good to see Nalukataq this year, an Eskimo whaling festival. "Not an unruly thing like it used to be."

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~ Samuel Simmonds

Simmonds says that he gets a better night's sleep because it's peaceful and quiet. "There's no rioting and hollering anymore."

Doreen Simmonds, a counselor at NSB's Sub-

stance Abuse Treatment Services, says the number of residential clients has dropped significantly since the ban. As a result, they no longer feel like they're in a crisis mode all the time.

"We were just doing the bare necessities before. But now our case loads are smaller, so we can work more individually with people. Now we can interact more in a positive way. There's even been some time available for training for the staff."

"It used to be that a lot of clients were ordered into treatment by the court. In some of our group sessions, the energy was dominated by the court-ordered people and it was really negative. Now we have a lot more self-referrals, and they're here because they want to be."