

This week honors health aides throughout Alaska

by Dr. Robert Quick
for the Tundra Times

BETHEL — Today marks the beginning of Community Health Aide Week. Gov. Steve Cowper proclaimed this special observance in order to publicly recognize the dedicated, vital and — at times — heroic service provided to the villages of rural Alaska by this unique group of individuals.

Community Health Aides — CHAs — are indeed the unsung heroines and heroes of Alaska. These overworked, underpaid and underappreciated health workers are truly the backbone of the health care system of rural Alaska.

They are the front-line providers of acute, chronic and preventive care, the first responders to emergencies and the vital link in a system that must operate over a vast region where the caprices of weather, transportation and communication at times isolate villages from all other sources of health care.

CHAs are the eyes, ears and hands of the doctors who are their consultants in the regional hospitals. But their job does not stop there. They serve as nurses, emergency medical technicians, laboratory technicians, pharmacists, social workers, counselors, clerks, health educators and administrators. They must provide 24-hour-a-day coverage to their villages seven days a week, 365 days a year.

Their patients include their neighbors, friends and relatives, and this greatly complicates their job because of the difficulty of separating emotional ties from the demands of providing health care.

It is no surprise that in a recent survey, 87 percent of CHAs in the Yukon Kuskokwim Delta said their job is stressful. The sources of stress include dealing with emergencies and death and dying, both major sources of stress for all health care providers.

Adding to the stress are the demands of balancing family and work burdens, which leave little time for rest. When villagers do not respect the privacy of CHAs who are *not* on call and call them up on their nights off, CHAs can begin to feel as if they never get a break.

When people expect home visits for non-emergency health problems or demand medicine when the CHA's best judgement indicates otherwise, such pressure translates into an even greater burden of stress.

When a CHA does not feel supported by the village council or by residents in the village, he or she can feel completely alone, wondering how to cope with the stress of this extremely important and demanding job.

Fortunately, there is substantial support for the CHAs. In a recent survey of consumers of health care in the delta, the vast majority of respondents expressed confidence in their CHAs, indicating their belief that CHAs provide good care.

A survey of health care providers in Bethel revealed the same positive feelings about the CHAs.

Some powerful people in Washington, D.C., also share a high regard for the CHAs, as well as a concern over their low pay.

Sens. Ted Stevens, R-Alaska, and Daniel Inouye, D-Hawaii, have managed to secure passage of funding increases for the CHA Program in Congress. The problem is that, except for the very noticeable support in Congress, the supportive majority in the villages is very quiet.

This week we all have an opportunity to become a vocal, supportive, appreciative majority. Community Health Aide Week provides the perfect

OPINION

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vehicle for letting your CHAs know that you appreciate their dedication, that you are grateful for the personal sacrifices they make to serve your village.

Talk to them about their job. Try to understand what they go through. Ask them how you can support them so that they can do the best job possible.

Do something nice for them. Think of ways of supporting them better in the future. Let them know you care.

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