

VISTA Volunteers Requesting Village Control of Program

As the controversy over VISTA continues, 24 VISTA volunteers have challenged the VISTA administration to meet the requests of native villages asking for local control of the program.

In a letter addressed to the Tundra Times, the volunteers wrote, "We challenge Mr. White, Mr. Allen, Mr. Cox (Office of the Governor), and Mr. Mercer (Regional OR OEO) to meet with the Native leaders in Bethel and develop a strong program centered around the principle of local control."

Jerry White is the director of OEO for Alaska, and Willie Allen is the coordinator of the VISTA program in Alaska.

The village of Bethel is one of 51 villages in the Yukon-Kuskokwim area which last month asked for no more VISTA volunteers unless the program is administered locally.

The controversy first came before the public eye last month when several past and present volunteers issued a position paper criticizing the administration of the program and calling for local control. In Alaska, the program is sponsored by the State and funded primarily by the Office of Economic Opportunity.

The paper was then followed by the resolution from the villages in the Yukon-Kuskokwim area organized as the Association of the Village Council Presidents (AVCP), calling for local control.

Both villages and volunteers alike have charged that the program operates without regard to the wishes and needs of the native people.

The letter sent to the Tundra Times by the volunteers was in response to a Jan. 23 article in the paper exploring the VISTA controversy.

Although the three-page single-spaced letter could not be printed in full due to a lack of space, some of the points raised in it

will be mentioned in the following paragraphs.

The volunteers commended the administration's ideas that VISTA be developed on a project basis, such as education, and that it become a two-year, rather than the current one-year, program.

However, at this point agreement between the volunteers and the administration seems to cease.

Allen said that he felt the attack upon the administration was blown out of proportion in the press because only a small number of volunteers had signed the critical position paper.

The volunteers said that the original signers of the paper were in Anchorage at the time and that, as more of the volunteers from the rural areas come into Anchorage for training, they will be given the opportunity to support the paper.

"It is expected," the letter says, "that at least half of the volunteers will support the paper and most, if not all, will support local control of VISTA Alaska."

Their expectations were in part born out last week when 31 of 34 volunteers in Anchorage went on record supporting native control of the program in the lower Yukon-Kuskokwim area.

Second, for the Tundra Times article the administrators discussed several changes that they would like to see made in the program.

And, while the volunteers agreed with some of the suggestions, as mentioned earlier, they contended that changes, when they occur, "are done secretly and without consultation with the village councils, volunteers, or the volunteer leaders" even though the village people have asked time and again for more participation in the programs that affect them.

Third, the volunteers disagreed

with White's statement that the program is essentially one of local control now and that the village council has the power to direct the activities of the volunteer.

To support their contention, the volunteers cited the case of Blanche Andrews, who was originally fired against the expressed wishes of the village council.

Fourth, Allen was reported to have said that the volunteer leaders who supervised the volunteers in their district did not understand the problems of the entire region because, as a previous volunteer, they had lived in only one village.

It is "absurd," the letter stated, for any volunteer leader to be expected to be a local expert on the problems of every village in his district.

Furthermore, the letter held that the administration's new policy of hiring supervisors to replace the fired volunteer leaders has not provided the necessary contact with village leaders.

The one supervisor who has been hired thus far, the letter stated, has done little in the way of contacting villages or volunteers.

In reply to Allen's comment that the volunteers and the administration need to work together, the volunteers wrote that they have tried to work with Allen but that he "has taken no action to incorporate suggestions, plans, pleas, requests, or demands coming from either volunteer leaders, volunteers, or village councils."

Never promise more than you can perform.
—Pubilius Syrus