

# STATE PUBLIC ASSISTANCE HIT

## Former Bush Legislator Raps Benefit Inequities In Urban, Bush Areas

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Last spring, increases in welfare payments voted by the state legislature raised Adult Public Assistance benefits an average of \$40 per case.

Old and/or disabled people in Juneau, Anchorage and Fairbanks received substantial increases in their APA benefits under the new bill.

Old people in Galena and many other rural areas found their benefits cut—by as much as \$100 per month for a husband and wife both receiving old age benefits.

Why? This question disturbed former House representative from Galena John Sackett who found these conditions in his home village.

"When we were in the legislature last year, we increased aid to dependent children and old age assistance by a good amount for an overall 25 per cent to 35 per cent across the board, thinking full well that everyone would benefit.

"As it turned out, when the Department of Health and Welfare started making the payments in July, all rural recipients were cut, while all city cases were increased."

Mrs. Carla Nyquist, the regional welfare worker for Galena (a district which includes Koyukuk, Hughes, Allakaket and Anaktuvuk Pass as well) found about 50 per cent of her APA cases cut.

On a statewide basis, her cases are hardly "statistically significant." As individuals, however, she feels her people are treated unfairly. Two major regulations contribute to this problem in rural areas.

First, there is Rent. Rural recipients usually do not pay rent. They own the uninsulated frame buildings, the small cabins they live in. They may pay \$100 per month for fuel, but welfare regulations set separate benefit scales for people who pay rent above \$35 per month. These scales are as much as \$65 per month higher per family.

(Top benefit for an "original recipient" paying rent above \$35 is \$250 per month; for a person who does not pay rent the top is \$185 per month.)

One solution to this inequity could be to pass legislation to allow the increased rate for rent or fuel expenses, suggested Mrs. Nyquist.

In Alaska, welfare rules are set in the state legislature—and changes can only come about through legislative action. In order to accomplish this, concerned people must put pressure on their representatives.

Another reason for the cut

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in rural areas is that a couple where both husband and wife are eligible for APA only qualifies for one full benefit. The husband is considered a "recipient" and his wife is classified as an "eligible spouse" allowed to collect only \$100 per month.

Before when benefits were considered separately, a couple could receive up to \$400 per month combined income.

This, explains John Sackett, allowed some of the old people to buy oil stoves to heat their houses so they would not need wood. They were not a drain on their children. Now, he says, they can barely buy fuel.

Housekeeping expenditures, explained Mrs. Nyquist, have been increased—but rural recipients do not know how to utilize this.

In the past, housekeeping expenses were figured in the family's monthly "budget" and the old or disabled person received the money in cash. Now, he must file a form (in triplicate) for reimbursement—which will not arrive for more than a month. This form, which provides unlimited housekeeping funds, may work in the cities, but it does not work in the villages.

"In the village," explained Mrs. Nyquist, "an old person or disabled person will look out the doorway till he sees a young boy or other younger person walking past.

"He'll call, 'Hey you!' and ask the boy to get him some wood, or light a fire or whatever the chore. Afterwards, he'd give the boy his 50 cents or whatever and make out O.K.

"Try explaining to a young boy in the village he has to submit a form in triplicate and then wait over a month for his money. He won't understand."

Thus, while procedures become more elaborate, rural recipients become more confused and unaware of what they are entitled to and how to get it," complained Mrs. Nyquist.

"The village Natives are exceptionally honest people," explained Mrs. Nyquist.

Many times, she said, people will ask whether it is fair for them to receive food stamps. After all, they already receive welfare assistance. Her clients, she said, would never think of "selling" their cabin to a relative so they could get added income by paying "rent."

"In New York or Los Angeles, we'd have hundreds of cases of this," she said. "Never in the Alaskan bush."

Honesty, pride, also leads many older people raising a child who qualifies for AFDC (aid for dependent children) benefits not to request the full amount of money.

In the villages, Native customary adoptions are common. Many grandparents will be raising a grandchild, often illegitimate. The state allows \$50 per month AFDC for an eligible youngster under 5, increasing to \$100 as the child reaches 18.

An eligible relative who cares for the child, such as his mother whose husband is not present or not working, can receive a total of \$125 per month. Any relative without support is eligible—grandmother, aunt, sister, etc.

Many grandparents, however, request support only for the child, not for themselves. They cannot see themselves accepting welfare—or taking financial advantage of the child's presence in their home.

Federal law requires that if a mother leaves her child with other relatives, they must file "abandonment and desertion forms" with the district attorney

before they can collect AFDC funds. Thus, another technicality.

What can be done? What is being done?

"Essentially, the program is good," explained Mrs. Nyquist. "It falls down for a few cases—as in Galena." She referred to a recent "Newsweek" article which ranked the AFDC benefits of the 50 states. Alaska headed the list with one of the fullest welfare programs.

"The government sets up standards without educating the people to deal with them," explained Mrs. Nyquist. After all, how many legislators have been out to the bush—places where it may cost as much as \$100 per month to heat houses without insulation?

That payments have increased, is without a doubt. Welfare consultant Tim Cook estimates some AFDC households may have doubled their benefits, or increased them substantially. APA households also increased substantially—with exceptions in each district.

The districts of Galena, Tok and Fort Yukon were the worst hit.

Legislation is the only answer to this problem.

In other ways, the welfare department is increasing its services.

What is needed most in the rural areas, in the field of welfare, are Native social workers available to the people in the rural areas.

Also, they need welfare offices in the villages, not located

in Fairbanks but available where clients can walk in with questions and requests.

Already, though Mrs. Nyquist still administers the Galena office from Fairbanks, the welfare department has hired a new eligibility worker in Galena—the transportation center in the district.

Offices for Barrow, Tok and Fort Yukon have recently moved from Fairbanks to these villages. Kotzebue and Nome already have their own welfare offices.

Right now, there is no direct path for an eligibility worker to move upwards—to a social worker I and II.

University of Alaska social work majors with their BA degrees qualify to fill Social Work I positions. The state requires Social Worker II—with qualifications including graduate work not available in Alaska.

The first tentative program to fill the gap in Native social workers is a program for "Human Service Aides" in Bethel, explained Cook.

These Human Service Aides were chosen from a list of candidates submitted from each village in the Bethel area. They received extensive training—up to one year in several segments—and provide services to their own villages and perhaps one or more neighboring villages.

This year, Bethel has six aides. If their budget remains, they will have six more this coming year, qualified to aid clients with food stamp, AFDC and APA eligibility.