

STATEMENT OF SENATOR FRANK H. MURKOWSKI  
BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS  
MARCH 3, 1989

Mr. Chairman, I want to thank you for holding this very important hearing on matters critically important to the people of Alaska. I commend you for your fine work at the helm of this important and unique committee. What began with your personal fact finding trip to rural Alaska last summer, followed by a thorough assessment by the Alaska Federation of Natives of the severe problems facing Alaska Native villages, brings us today to this oversight hearing on that important report.

I also commend the AFN for their extraordinary effort in putting together this report. For more than 22 years, the Alaska Federation of Natives has been an effective advocate for our Eskimo, Indian and Aleut peoples. In a state that just celebrated its 30th anniversary of Statehood, 22 years of success is a most significant tenure of service.

Mr. Chairman, I will keep my remarks short so that the Committee's time may be used to listen to the message delivered by the Alaskans who have traveled so far to testify here today. I have read carefully AFN's report, and I am deeply disturbed by the trends it reveals.

Alcohol abuse, violence and self-destruction are afflicting village Alaska. Native males between the ages of 20 and 24 are killing themselves at a rate 14 times the national average. Fetal alcohol syndrome affects Alaska Native infants at twice the national rate. Accidents are the leading cause of Native mortality -- more than 50% higher than cancer and heart disease, the second and third leading causes of Native deaths. Accidental deaths among our Natives are three times the national average.

Mr. Chairman, what is most disturbing is that young Native adults and Native children are the populations most at risk. In 1980, 23% of all Alaska Natives were under the age of 10, and Natives between the ages of 10 and 19 comprise the largest age group in the Native population.

Many of the social problems in village Alaska are related to the economic viability of rural Native communities. In 1988, only 42% of working-age Alaska Natives were members of the active labor force, as compared to nearly 86% of working-age non-Natives. And a majority of the Natives who were employed work for the government. When dollars disappear for federal or state programs such as funding for the Johnson-O'Malley Act programs, villages not only lose the program, but they lose jobs.

In 1986, the average Alaskan made \$17,400 a year, yet the average Native living in Western Alaska made \$11,300. And because of the high cost of living in rural Alaska, wages are worth less. The average Native family living in Kotzebue or Nome, for instance, spends 62% more per week on food, 165% more on electricity and 46% more on a barrel of heating oil than does a family living in Anchorage.

Mr. Chairman, each year Natives in rural Alaska are increasingly dependent on a cash economy and the cash is simply not there. Because there are few jobs and little money to be earned, too many Natives depend upon the Federal or State government for their basic needs. But a high price is paid for a large government role in the villages. Economic dependence engenders low self-esteem that contributes to the cycle of depression, alcohol abuse, violence and death.

Further, the cost of maintaining and operating the infrastructure built in the villages with federal or state money is often found to be beyond the means of the villages, the state or federal programs. While water and sewage treatment facilities are

critical to the health of Natives in rural Alaska, who is to pay to operate these facilities once they are built?

Education is another area of concern. The number of Native students graduating from high school has been steadily increasing, and much of this is attributable to the State's construction of small village high schools. By 1984, the state had built and was operating 126 schools and 1,000 students were graduating annually.

But we must do better, if our Native people are to have decent jobs. In the 1950's and 60's the Alaska Native community concentrated on the issue of their land claims. After passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, the Native community was forced to rapidly understand and implement that act. Many of the job opportunities created by ANCSA, however, have not been filled by Natives. There are too few Natives with the education level necessary for those jobs.

The challenges presented to us are extremely complex because of the joint federal and state roles, plus the need for local self-determination.

- We must find new and better ways to cope with the pressures of rapid cultural change,
- to recognize Alaska Natives as ethnically distinct groups of people whose rich culture and traditions are valuable to us all,
- and to live up to our responsibilities for the health, education and welfare of the Native people.

This will require the federal and state governments to work closely with the villages to develop strategies the Native people can call their own. As history has shown us, governmental solutions imposed on village people do not produce the best results in many instances..

That's why I support the idea of a joint federal/state/village commission to dig deeply into the root causes of the problems facing

rural Alaska. This commission would develop recommendations for turning around the disturbing trends identified by the AFN report. This kind of effort is necessary to take our Committee's work a step beyond identifying the severity of the problems facing village Alaska, and moving toward concrete proposals for improving village life and the future of young Alaska Natives.

The inquiry this Committee has undertaken is a very important first step, but our efforts can't stop here. The AFN report has only scratched the surface of the problems. We have a way to go to develop the solutions, and I again commend the Chairman for calling this important forum.