

Statement of Senator Frank Murkowski
Alcohol, Substance and Inhalant Abuse in Alaska
Committee on Indian Affairs
October 4, 2000

Good Morning and thank you for attending this hearing on the critical issue of alcohol, substance, and inhalant abuse in our Alaska Native Villages.

Many studies have shown that alcohol abuse, in particular, is the most devastating problem that afflicts Villages in Alaska. In fact, the Alaska Commission on Rural Governance and Empowerment found that the number of cases of fetal alcohol syndrome among Alaska Natives is three times as high as the non-Native population.

Data reported by the Alaska Division of Alcoholism and Drug Abuse indicates that nine out of 10 Alaska Natives who choose to use alcohol become alcohol abusers. Of those nine, four become dependent/addicted. Although Alaska Natives make up only 17 percent of the population of the state, 38 percent of those who die by suicide are Alaska Natives. And according to statistical data, two-thirds to three-quarters of these Alaska Native suicides were drinking at the time of their death. According to the Department of Public Safety, alcohol use has been involved in over 60 percent of violent crime in rural Alaska

Similar problems exist with other substances. For example, dependence upon marijuana is 1.0% of the population in urban Alaska. In bush Alaska, this marijuana dependence increases an astonishing 150%, to 2.5% of the population. Just as disturbing, bush Alaska experiences much higher levels of inhalant abuse. Inhalant abuse, often described as the "silent killer," is the intentional breathing of gas or vapors with the purpose of reaching a "high." These legal substances are easy to obtain in areas that lack access to other drugs, and have proven difficult to regulate. Informal surveys have estimated that almost 25% of children between 12 and 18 years of age have abused inhalants. In fact, a recent survey by a rural Alaskan Native Health Corp. indicated that in two villages, 100% of kids ages 3 and up had tried inhalants.

These are not just statistics, these are human tragedies that especially in the case of fetal alcohol syndrome children, can carry on for a lifetime.

One of the reasons I am holding this hearing today is because there has been a proposal put forth by the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) that would transfer regulation of alcoholic beverages in Alaska villages to federally recognized Alaska tribes. Reviewing the statistics on alcohol dependence and substance and inhalant abuse suggests to me that the tragic problems we face in our villages are not strictly law enforcement issues.

Experts who have dealt with these problems indicate that efforts to combat abuse must be multi-faceted, encompassing prevention and treatment as well as law enforcement. Obviously, in the case of inhalant abuse, law enforcement is not an issue since these products are legal.

At some point, I think we must recognize that education and prevention programs can only achieve so much in the fight against substance abuse. I think we have to consider why there is so much substance abuse in rural villages. In my own view, a big part of the problem is the fact that many of these communities do not have good economic prospects for the future.

I think if the state and private industry could partner to develop good paying jobs in mining, timber and oil services, many of these problems would disappear because there is nothing that can build self-esteem more than having a good job and the prospect of improving one's lot in life.

I know that there is one thing that we all can agree on before we go forward with this hearing. And that is that the State, the Department of Justice and especially AFN must make a commitment to do everything to help defeat Initiative 5 on the Alaska ballot. That initiative would essentially legalize the use of marijuana.

I have been told by one of our witnesses, Ernie Turner, the Director of the Alaska Division of Alcoholism and Drug Abuse, that marijuana is the gateway drug for alcohol abuse in our villages. I would hope we would all agree that a concerted public campaign to defeat this initiative would be in the best interests of all our citizens, especially the residents in our villages.

I am committed to working with the State, AFN, public health and law enforcement officials to try to develop a comprehensive approach to the terrible problems of alcohol and substance abuse in our villages. I hope that this hearing will be a first step in bringing all interested parties to the table to find a workable solution to this tragedy.