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AVCP
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The Voice of the Region



TESTIMONY
Nicholas Hoover, Director
Social Services

GOOD AFTERNOON, CHAIRMAN STEDMAN AND COMMITTEE MEMBERS.

MY NAME IS NICHOLAS HOOVER, AND I AM THE DIRECTOR FOR THE SOCIAL SERVICES DEPARTMENT OF THE ASSOCIATION OF VILLAGE COUNCIL PRESIDENTS. MY TESTIMONY IS PRESENTED ON BEHALF OF AVCP. IT IS AN HONOR AND PRIVILEGE TO BE HERE. THANK YOU FOR THE OPPORTUNITY TO PRESENT OUR STATEMENT ON HOUSE BILL 301.

AVCP IS A NATIVE NONPROFIT THAT REPRESENTS 56 FEDERALLY-RECOGNIZED INDIAN TRIBES ON THE YUKON-KUSKOKWIM DELTA. NONE OF OUR VILLAGES ARE CONNECTED BY ROAD TO EACH OTHER OR THE REST OF ALASKA. WE LIVE IN AN AREA WITH THE HIGHEST UNEMPLOYMENT RATE AND LOWEST PER CAPITA INCOME IN THE STATE. AVCP PROVIDES SOCIAL SERVICES TO OVER 38 HOUSEHOLDS OF OUR TRIBES. OUR VILLAGES ARE SCATTERED AROUND A REGION ABOUT THE SIZE OF THE STATE OF OREGON. ONE OF THE SOCIAL SERVICES WE PROVIDE INCLUDES ASSISTANCE TO OUR MEMBERS WHEN A FAMILY MEMBER PASSES AWAY. THIS BURIAL ASSISTANCE IS UNDER THE BUREAU OF INDIAN AFFAIRS WELFARE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM AND COMES IN THE FORM OF A MONETARY CONTRIBUTION TOWARD THE DECEASED'S BURIAL EXPENSES. THIS CAN INCLUDE DIRECT PAYMENT TO A FUNERAL HOME WHEN THEY REFUSE TO RELEASE THE BODY BEFORE PAYMENT CAN BE MADE. AVCP HAS AN ANNUAL BUDGET OF APPROXIMATELY \$180,000 FOR BURIAL ASSISTANCE, WHICH IS CONSISTENTLY OVERSPENT.

WE ARE CONTINUALLY CONTACTED EVERY YEAR BY TRIBAL MEMBERS WHO COMPLAIN ABOUT THE STATE PROCESS THEY MUST NAVIGATE THROUGH WHEN A LOVED ONE PASSES AWAY. FIRST, THE ISSUANCE OF A DEATH CERTIFICATE, OR THE DECLARATION OF DEATH, MUST SOMETIMES WAIT FOR SOMEONE QUALIFIED.

Akiachak
 Akiak
 Alakanuk
 Andreafsky
 Aniak
 Atmautluak
 Bethel
 Bill Moore's Sl.
 Cheofmak
 Chevak
 Chudibluk
 Chulnonawick
 Crooked Creek
 Eek
 Emmonak
 Georgetown
 Goodnews Bay
 Hamilton
 Hooper Bay
 Lower Kalskag
 Upper Kalskag
 Kasigluk
 Kipruk
 Kongiganak
 Kotlik
 Kwethlik
 Kwigillingok
 Lime Village
 Marshall
 Mekoryuk
 Mtn. Village
 Napaimut
 Napakiak
 Napaskink
 Newtok
 Nightmute
 Nunakauyuk
 Nunam Iqua
 Nunapitchuk
 Ohogamiut
 Oscarville
 Palmit
 Pilot Station
 Pitka's Point
 Platinum
 Quinhagak
 Red Devil
 Russian Mission
 Scammon Bay
 Sleetmute
 St. Mary's
 Stony River
 Tuluksak
 Tunatluak
 Tununak
 Umiukmiut

SECONDLY, THEY ARE TOLD THEY MUST WAIT TO START THE BEREAVEMENT PROCESS BECAUSE THEIR LOVED ONE MUST BE TRANSPORTED TO ANCHORAGE FOR AN AUTOPSY. WHEN THIS HAPPENS, FAMILIES ARE NOT USUALLY AWARE OF AVAILABLE FUNER HOMES TO GET SERVICES FROM. SO, THEY END UP USING THE ONE WITH THE MOST FAMILIAR NAME, WHICH HAS TURNED OUT TO BE ONE OF THE MOST EXPENSIVE IN THE ANCHORAGE AREA.

MORE IMPORTANTLY, THESE FAMILIES WHO QUALIFY FOR WELFARE ASSISTATNCE HAVE NO RESOURCES TO COVER THESE COSTS AT FACILITIES THAT DO NOT PROVIDE REDUCED "LEGACY SERVICES FOR ALASKA NATIVES." IN ADDITION, WHEN THE FAMILY CONTACTS THE FUNERAL HOME, THEY ARE TOLD THE FUNERAL HOME WILL NOT RELEASE THE BODY BACK TO THE MEDICAL EXAMINER'S OFFICE UNTI PAYMENT IS MADE IN FULL, BASICALLY HOLDING THE DECEASED'S REMAINS HOSTAGE. IN SITUATIONS WHERE THE BODY HAS BEEN TRANSPORTED BACK BY THE STATE, THE STATE HAS TOLD THE FAMILY THAT IT IS ONLY RESPONSIBLE FOR PAYING TRANSPORTATION FOR THE WEIGHT OF THE REMAINS WHEN IT WAS ORIGINALLY TRANSPORTED TO ANCHORAGE. IN OTHER WORDS, ADDITIONAL WEIGHT CAUSED BY THE CASKET OR OTHER ADDITIONAL SERVICES ARE PAID FOR EITHER BY THE FAMILY, THE TRIBE, OR AVCP. IN THESE TIGHT BUDGET TIMES, NO ONE HAS THE EXTRA FUNDS TO COVER THESE COSTS. SO, FUNDS THAT ARE SUPPOSED TO BE DEDICATED TO MEMORIAL SERVICES OR FUNERALS ARE SPENT ON TRANSPORTATION FROM ANCHORAGE.

IN 2010, AVCP, AFTER COUNLESS COMPLAINTS FROM OUR TRIBES, TRIED TO REACH OUT TO THE MEDICAL EXAMINER'S OFFICE SEVERAL TIMES. WE WANTED OT SET UP A MEETING TO FIND A WAY TO RESOLVE SOME OF THESE PROBLEMS. OUR CALLS WERE NOT RETURNED.

AT AVCP'S ANNULA CONVENTION IN OCTOBER, 2010, THIS ISSUE WAS RAISED AGAIN, AND WE HAD TO REPORT TO OUR TRIBES THAT WE HAD NO SUCCESS IN HAVING ANY DISCUSSIONS WITH THE MEDICAL EXAMINER'S OFFICE. AT THAT CONVENTION, THE TRIBES PASSED A RESOLUTION DECLARING THE CURRENT SYSTEM A PROBLEM FOR RURAL ALASKA NATIVES AND MADE IT A PRIORITY. AFTER THE CONVENTION, AND ALSO IN 2011, WE AGAIN TRIED CONTACTING THE MEDICAL EXAMINER'S OFFICE. OUR CALLS WERE STILL NOT RETURNED.

I AM SORRY TO SAY THAT I HAVE FIELDDED CALLS TOO NUMEROUS TO COUNT FORM GRIEVING FAMILIES COMPLAINING ABOUT THE CURRENT SYSTEM. THEY MUST DEAL NOT ONLY WITH THEIR LOSS BUT UNEXPECTED COSTS THEY CANNOT AFFORD. THEIR GRIEF IN THESE SITUATIONS IS INDESCRIBABLE.

THIS HAS BEEN HAPPENING IN OUR REGION FOR TOO LONG. AVCP FULLY SUPPORTS HB301. WE BELIEVE IT WILL PROVIDE A MUCH-NEEDED FIX AND REDUCE THE UNNECESSARY STRESS PLACED UPON OUR GRIEVING FAMILIES.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME.