

Alaskan Seniors Living Longer Growing Stronger

from the Alaska Commission on Aging

The mission of the Alaska Commission on Aging is to ensure dignity and independence for Alaska's seniors and to assist them through programs and services, funded by the Commission, to lead useful and meaningful lives.



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Appointees Named to Commission on Aging

Governor Frank H. Murkowski has announced the appointment of three new members to the Alaska Commission on Aging, and has reappointed a fourth member.

Frank Appel and Priscilla Thorsness of Anchorage, and Betty Keegan of Wrangell are new Commissioners. Banarsi Lal of Fairbanks has been reappointed to the Commission for a second term.

Frank Appel, who has a long history of involvement with community service organizations, has helped the Alzheimer's Agency, Volunteers of America, and United Way. With a background in business and accounting, Appel served for 17 years as vice chancellor for business services at University of Alaska, Anchorage. He has an MBA in Finance from Seattle University.

Betty Keegan has lived in Wrangell for 30 years. She has been involved in health care and elderly issues for 40 years, and has managed Wrangell Senior Apartments for the past 13 years. She also serves on the Wrangell planning and zoning commission, the city charter commission, and a mayor-appointed committee to look into assisted living needs in Wrangell.

Priscilla Thorsness, an Anchorage resident for 48 years, has served on many community boards and commissions including the Alaska Music Board, the Republican Women's Club Board, the Salvation Army Booth Home Board and the Anchorage Women's Club.

Banarsi Lal, who by now is familiar to many readers, is a 30-year resident of Fairbanks and a recent retiree from the behavioral health field. He directed behavioral health services for the Fairbanks Native Association for 24 years. He has a Masters in Social Work from Lucknow University and an MA in Psychology from Agra University. He has served on the Commission on Aging since June 2000, and is currently Commission Chair.

The new Commissioners will have their first meeting with the standing Commissioners in Anchorage December 16th and 17th in the Frontier Building. This meeting will focus on introducing and orienting the new Commissioners to their new responsibilities. The meeting starts at 1:00 PM on the 16th and runs all day on the 17th. The standing Commissioners are Steve Ashman, Doris Bacus, Ella Craig, Jesse Gardner, Gene Kane, Dan Karmun, Sr. and Ray Matiashowski.

For more information on the meeting, please call Lillian Bradley, (907) 465-3250.

Cook Inlet Tribal Council's Wisdom Place

Jonathan Sussman, Grants Specialist, Cook Inlet Tribal Council, Inc.

Many Alaskans regard alcohol and drug abuse as the state's most destructive public health problem. Consider the following: Alaska has the highest alcohol mortality rate in the nation, the second highest rate of binge drinking, and its residents are almost twice more likely than other Americans to require treatment for alcohol use.

Even worse, these statistics conceal a "hidden epidemic" among our senior population, especially our Alaska Native Elders. The rates of misuse and abuse of alcohol and prescription drugs in the senior population are much greater than rates among the younger population. This means that as America "grays," we will find increasing populations of older Americans, including Alaskans, facing alcohol and substance abuse problems.

Fortunately, with special approaches, substance abuse treatment for older individuals can be highly successful. Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC) in Anchorage operates a residential treatment program tailored specifically to address the unique challenges faced by seniors with substance abuse issues. Funded by the federal government's Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), Wisdom Place at the Ernie Turner Center is the only residential substance abuse treatment program in Alaska specifically designed for Native Elders 55 years and older.

Though intended to meet the treatment needs of Alaska Native Elders experiencing substance abuse problems, other older Alaskans from all walks of life participate in the program. As one 63 year-old participant stated "I wanted to be around people my own age." This sentiment is validated by recent research that investigates alcohol and substance abuse among older populations. While some researchers have found that alcoholism among the elderly is less common than among younger age groups, there is little debate that drinking patterns remain relatively stable with age. Problem drinking can strike at any age.

Age complicates matters for a variety of reasons. Older patients are more likely to rely on prescription and over-the-counter drugs. They may misunderstand how all of these products interact with each other and with alcohol, thus creating dangerous conditions that may lead to substance misuse or abuse. Also, aging itself makes seniors more vulnerable to the ill effects of alcohol and drugs by slowing brain activity, thus altering judgment and coordination. An older adult's problem with alcohol or drugs may not be easily detectable because caregivers misjudge the senior adult as having a medical or psychiatric condition attributed to aging alone. For example, depression, dementia, poor nutrition, heart problems, and falls are thought to be a normal part of growing old, yet these symptoms can also be an important red flag for recognizing a possible alcohol or substance abuse problem.

Changing life situations may also contribute to "late onset" alcoholism in individuals who had never previously abused alcohol. These may include the death of a spouse, retirement, inadequate finances, children leaving the home or raising grandchildren. Finally, there is a common misconception that at later stages in life, it is not worth changing habits and attitudes. Through Wisdom Place at the Ernie Turner Center, CITC is working to change that perception.

Wisdom Place is a nine bed, co-ed residential program that is 90 to 120 days in length. Treatment is designed to meet the needs of older individuals who face substance abuse issues. Wisdom Place's unique "Elder System of

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Wisdom Place (continued from page 2.)

Care” allows case managers to guide each elder through the treatment process by addressing the full range of health, mental health, cultural, spiritual and basic survival skill needs of participants. “It’s not just a program,” remarks one participant. “We don’t feel like we’re in an old folks’ home. This is a disease that hits any age, any nationality, any social standing.”

At the core of CITC’s residential treatment services is the “Village of Services,” which combines the principles of a therapeutic community model and the governing principles of an Alaska Native village. The Village of Services has two populations: participants under age 55 and those over age 55. Together, the “community” emphasizes the communal nature of recovery in which each resident contributes to the welfare of the whole community. Elders are vital members, helping to govern the community through a “Village Council.” A past resident stated that she enjoyed mingling with the younger people and sharing with them her experiences of thirty years ago “so they might benefit from the lessons I’ve learned. I wish someone my age could have explained all this to me years ago, when I was their age.”

CITC’s Wisdom Place recognizes that treatment for Native Elders requires a slower pace. The organization has tailored its treatment schedule to accommodate the fact that most individuals have slowed down since their youth and may tire more easily. Because the Elders add a familiarity to and connection with Native culture, they frequently bring special skills or experiences to the treatment program. This presence of Elders within our Village Community seems to connect or draw out the forgotten and unspoken Native cultural norms regarding how Elders are traditionally respected and treated within the family. According to one participant, “[it’s] more or less ... like being in a family: we shared in the decision making and I get support from my peers.”

Because Wisdom Place is designed to take into account the different needs of individuals 55 years and older facing substance abuse issues, the program is gaining recognition as an effective alternative to more traditional treatment offerings. One resident summed up Wisdom Place as “the only program of its kind in Alaska. Participants come from all over the state. I finally found a place to get the treatment I needed and not feel out of place for being the oldest one there.”

Referrals to Wisdom Place are accepted from throughout the State. For additional information about Cook Inlet Tribal Council’s Wisdom Place contact Clinical Director, Deborah Wing at 1-800-478-4786 or (907) 550-2423.

Senior Advocacy Coalition Monthly Teleconferences

The Senior Advocacy Coalition meets by teleconference from 9:30 to 11:30 AM on the second Friday of every month to address issues affecting Alaska’s seniors. The teleconference originates at the Anchorage Senior Center.

For more information on joining a meeting, contact Sue Samet, 261-4140, Brenda Brown, 338-6492, or 261-4848 in Anchorage; Fred Lau, 235-7655 in Homer; or Lisa Morley, 465-4798 in Juneau.

