

Statement of Nelson N. Angapak, Sr.
Vice President,
Alaska Federation of Natives,
In front of the
U. S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs on the
Access to and Delivery of Health Care Services to the
Returning Members of the
3rd Battalion, 297th Infantry Brigade
Alaska Army National Guard
November 30, 2007

Introduction

Good morning Madam Vice Chairperson Lisa Murkowski:
Honorable members of the U. S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs and gentlemen:

On behalf of the Alaska Natives and the American Indians, congratulations for being appointed to this position recently. This promotion demonstrates the confidence and the trust of the other U. S. Senators of your talents and capacities that you have as a member of the U. S. Senate.

For the record, my name is Nelson N. Angapak, Sr., Vice President, Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN). For your information, AFN is a statewide Native organization formed in 1966 to represent Alaska's 100,000+ Eskimos, Indians and Aleuts on concerns and issues affecting their rights and property interests. I am a veteran and I served in active duty in the U. S. Army from 1969 to 1971; I was honorably discharged.

On behalf of AFN, its Board of Directors and membership, thank you very much for inviting me to submit this statement to the U. S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs on the access to and delivery of healthcare services to the returning members of the 3rd Battalion, 297th Infantry Brigade, Alaska National Guard who have recently returned from their deployment in Kuwait and Iraq and other Alaska Native veterans residing in Native villages of rural Alaska.

I want to take this opportunity to thank you and the U.S. Senate for having worked with AFN and the Alaska Native Community during the past millennium on issues of concern to AFN and the Alaska Native Community. During the last millennium, U.S. Congress passed a series of historic legislation that benefited the Alaska Native Community. Some examples of such legislation include, but are not limited to: P.L. 92-203, the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act; Indian Child Welfare Act, the Indian Self-Determination Act, Title VIII of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act; just to name a few.

I would like to bring the following points to your attention up front:

1. As the 20th century closes, there are nearly 190,000 Native American military veterans. It is well recognized that, historically, Native Americans (including Alaska Natives), have the highest record of service per capita when compared to other ethnic groups. The reasons behind this disproportionate contribution are complex and deeply rooted in traditional American Indian culture. In many respects, Native Americans are no different from others who volunteer for military service. They do, however, have distinctive cultural values which drive them to serve their country. One such value is their proud warrior tradition.¹
2. The Native American's strong sense of patriotism and courage emerged once again during the Vietnam era. More than 42,000 Native Americans, more than 90 percent of them volunteers, fought in Vietnam. Native American contributions in United States military combat continued in the 1980s and 1990s as they served in Grenada, Panama, Somalia, and the Persian Gulf.² I would venture to say that 100% of the members of the 3rd Battalion, 297th Infantry Brigade volunteered to serve this nation in its Armed Forces.
3. The outbreak of World War II brought Native American warriors back to the battlefield in defense of their homeland. Although now eligible for the draft by virtue of the Snyder Act, which gave citizenship to American Indians in 1924, conscription alone does not account for the disproportionate number of Native Americans who joined the armed services. More than 44,000 Native Americans, out of a total Native American population of less than 350,000, served with distinction between 1941 and 1945 in both the European and Pacific theaters of war. Native American men and women on the home front also showed an intense desire to serve their country, and were an integral part of the war effort. More than 40,000 Indian people left their reservations to work in ordnance depots, factories, and other war industries. Native Americans also invested more than \$50 million in war bonds, and contributed generously to the Red Cross and the Army and Navy Relief societies.³

Please note that these three points were excerpted from a website of the DEPARTMENT OF THE NAVY -- NAVAL HISTORICAL CENTER; 805 KIDDER BREESE SE -- WASHINGTON NAVY YARD; WASHINGTON DC 20374-5060. This is public information that is readily available for the people of the United States of America.

The Need for this Hearing on the Delivery of Healthcare and Other Benefits to our Troops in Alaska Native Villages in rural Alaska

Thank you for demonstrating your concern for the well-being of all of our veterans; and in particular, the Alaska Native veterans living in remote rural Alaska villages. You've demonstrated your concern for the well being of our veterans in multitude ways; arranging this meeting of individuals and organizations concerned with the healthcare

¹ <http://www.history.navy.mil/faqs/faq61-1.htm>

² Ibid

³ Ibid

and other issues impacting our veterans, this public hearing, etc. I for one appreciate the commitment that you've demonstrated by your actions on veterans' issues.

Please allow me to quote the comments you made on November 10, 2006—Veterans' Day:

Thousands of Alaskans are serving in Iraq and Afghanistan today. We have extensive deployments from our military bases in Fairbanks and Anchorage. Additionally, over 600 members of the Alaska National Guard's 3rd Battalion who hail from nearly every community in Alaska – Southeast to Barrow. They've survived the summer heat at Camp Shelby in Mississippi. They will perform with valor in the Middle East.

But they will have quite an adjustment ahead when they return home – many to remote places where veterans' services are hard to come by. They will be seeking the sympathetic ears of soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines who have been there and done that. I know Alaskans will provide that support and more.⁴

I know deep in my heart, that you have a genuine interests for the well being of the Alaska Native and other veterans in Alaska, and in particular, those living in rural Alaska. Your intentions and concerns for the well-being of our veterans is genuine and you have demonstrated that time and time again by your actions and those actions speak louder than your words. Thank you very much for this.

I know many of the returning members of the 3rd Battalion, 297th Infantry Brigade National Guard, many of them on a first name basis; from the Yukon Kuskokwim area. I've seen the National Guard members themselves when they are on R&R from their deployments and you know, some of them are different, their spouses and other family members also have told me that the guard member from their families are different; they appear the same physically but are different in other ways. I think the other ways they are referring to may be the manner in which the guard members are dealing with their deployment in Kuwait and the incursions many of them took into Southern Iraq. I think we can say we understand what these guys are experiencing but until we've been in their shoes, I don't think we can understand what they are going through. Many of the family members have told me these things because of the trust they have on their clergy. I serve as an acolyte in the Anchorage Moravia Church; and it has been in this capacity that people from the Yukon/Kuskokwim have told me these things. The best way of describing an acolyte in the Moravian Church is that we are commissioned by our church to carry out the duties of a pastor in absence of one—baptizing, officiating the Holy Communion, officiating marriages just to name a few.

The biggest concern I've expressed time and again is the delivery of benefits our troops earned during their deployments overseas. Present paradigm: a veteran has to travel to Anchorage or other urban settings for their initial evaluation—they may not have the financial resources to accomplish this; and if they, when push comes to shove, the returning member will likely chose to help their family members rather than themselves if they find having to help their families or take care of their personal ghosts.

⁴ Quote from Press Release of November 10, 2006

Alternative means of delivering healthcare and other benefits to our veterans living in rural Alaska villages exist and may include, but are not limited to:

1. Utilization of telemedicine where available assuming VA's system is compatible to what is exists out there; (If VA's software is not compatible to the software utilized by the providers of telemedicine in rural Alaska, it seems such software can be developed for this purpose.) This capability exists and it has a great potential of being an innovative means of delivering healthcare and other benefits to the returning members of the 3rd Battalion, 297th Infantry Brigade, Alaska National Guard who have recently returned from their deployment in Kuwait and Iraq and other Alaska Native veterans residing in Native villages of rural Alaska.

On Saturday, October 27, 2007, the delegates to the 2007 AFN Convention passed the attached resolutions:

- **WELCOMING HOME THE 1st, 2nd, AND 3RD BATTALION 297TH ARMY NATIONAL GUARD:** This resolution welcoming the returning troops was passed unanimously by the delegates to the 2007 SFN Convention in Fairbanks, Alaska.
- 2. Utilization of existing health care facilities that exist in rural Alaska with VA reimbursing them for treating veterans in these facilities. This may require legislation to treat non-Alaska Native veterans if the health care facilities in rural Alaska are for Alaska Natives. I think this has the greatest potential of being an alternative method of delivering healthcare and other benefits to the returning members of the 3rd Battalion, 297th Infantry Brigade, Alaska National Guard who have recently returned from their deployment in Kuwait and Iraq and other Alaska Native veterans residing in Native villages of rural Alaska.
- **HEALTHCARE FACILITIES IN RURAL ALASKA AND VA CARE FOR VETERANS LIVING IN RURAL ALASKA:** This resolution was passed unanimously by the delegates to the 2007 SFN Convention in Fairbanks, Alaska urging VA to utilize healthcare facilities as a means of addressing the healthcare needs of our veterans living in rural Alaska.

I've raised these points over and over in the past with the VA personnel and to date; I have not seen any earth shaking and convincing evidence and documents whereby VA promises that they have found different means of dealing with the delivery of these benefits our veterans have so rightly earned.

As a matter of fact, I met with Mr. Peltola, President and CEO of the Yukon Kuskokwim Health Corporation on Friday, November 23, 2007 and we discussed this hearing and the fact that I was invited to testify in front of this committee on Friday, November 30, 2007. Mr. Peltola advised me that he met with you, Senator Murkowski, in August of this year (2007) in which he advised you that he has not met with anybody from the Alaska office of the U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs. He then advised that shortly after he had informed you of this fact, someone from Alaska VA offices have flown to Bethel to meet with him and his staff twice on the issues impacting the returning members of the 3rd

Battalion, 297th Infantry Brigade. To date, he has not seen anything developing from these meetings; his conclusion was—this was all talk as he has not seen any developments on the delivery of healthcare and other benefits promised our troops from the time they were in active duty in the U. S. Armed Forces.

Senator Murkowski, I've been involved in a number of meetings where VA personnel were present a number of times and to date, I've heard discussions of some plans or things VA is doing or plans to do in Alaska on the delivery of healthcare and other benefits to our veterans in rural Alaska; but to date, I have not seen any tangible things that Alaska VA is doing on finding ways and means of improving the delivery of the benefits promised our veterans in living in rural Alaska and in particular, the Alaska Native villages.

Mr. Peltola and I have one common major concern: our returning troops, just like the other members of the OEF/OIF veterans across this nation will be experiencing mental health issues and we are not certain that VA in Alaska is ready to address this issue head on.

VA in Alaska has no presence in rural Alaska any place. They live in accordance to their present paradigm of operation—veterans living in rural Alaska must pay their own way to the urban settings in Anchorage to be even considered for their initial evaluations; I do not see this paradigm changing anytime soon; not for the veterans of World War II, not for the veterans of 'Nam Conflict, not for the veterans of the Kosovo Conflict, nor do I see VA changing its paradigm even for our troops from rural Alaska who deployed pursuant to OEF/OIF.

Veterans in Rural Alaska and America

The challenge of providing services to a rural and isolated veteran population extends beyond the boundaries of Native Americans and Alaska Natives; it affects all veterans living in rural and isolated areas of the Continental United States, and its territories. We recognize and we compliment the U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs for its strides in identifying and implementing systems and programs for rural and isolated areas; yet, challenges continue to affect that minority veteran population; and in particular, the Alaska Native veterans living in rural Alaska. This affects the returning members of the 3rd Battalion, 297th Infantry Brigade.

There are some things that VA in Alaska must consider and some of those include, but are not limited to the following:

Promote culturally and geographically relevant outreach programs and efforts throughout the VA, by

- Increasing and funding more fulltime positions for the training and hiring of Minority veterans, including Alaska Natives in Alaska in areas, where there is a large minority veteran population. At the present time, I do not think that there is a single Alaska Native on the staff of Alaska VA in any policy making position. We recommend that VA Alaska considers hiring Alaska Natives in policy making

positions who understand the needs of the veterans living in rural Alaska, and in particular, the Alaska Natives.

- Increasing outreach, responsiveness, and formal consultation with tribal governments and tribal leaders, particularly out in the field. This issue has been the subject of several presidential addresses:
 - Richard M. Nixon, “1970 Special Message to the Congress on Indian Affairs;”
 - Ronald Regan, “1983 Statement on Indian Policy;”
 - George H.W. Bush, “1991 Statement Reaffirming the Government-to-Government Relationship Between the Federal Government and Indian Tribal Governments;”
 - William J. Clinton, Executive Memorandum (April 1994), “Government to Government Relations with Native American Tribal Governments”, and Executive Order 13175 (November 2000), “Consultation & Coordination with Indian Tribal Government;”
 - George W. Bush, Executive Memorandum (September 2004), “Government-to-Government Relationship with Tribal Governments.”
- Improving transition processing for Reserve and National Guard personnel returning from deployments.

Improve diversity at all staff levels of the VA Alaska with veterans of various military background and rank reflective of both officer and enlisted members to ensure equitable representation of veterans and their experiences. There is no need to elaborate on this matter; but the following should be included, at the very least:

- VA must establish and monitor intensive training program for Senior VA leaders, managers, and their staff, on cultural diversities and language competencies within the veteran population being served.
- VA must employ or train personnel to be conversant in the predominant language or dialect within its sphere of influence and/or operation in order to assure the highest level of customer service. As an example, I think the Yupik language is the easiest language one can learn; many from my generation did not have to go to school to learn to speak Yupik; that is how easy this language is.

The United States Congress, if necessary, should consider legislation that would mandate U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs to address the medical needs of veterans living in rural America and in particular, Alaska Native villages, including the mental health needs of the returning members of the 3rd Battalion, 297th Infantry Brigade.

Finally, if VA Alaska does not demonstrate any visible means of addressing the needs of our veterans living in rural Alaska, maybe it is time for U. S. Congress to consider asking the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO), “the investigative arm of Congress” and “the congressional watchdog” to investigate what VA Alaska is doing on the delivery of healthcare to the veterans of OEF/OIF in rural America and in particular,

in rural Alaska villages and report its findings to Congress. I think such an investigation would be impartial and have credence since that is the job of GAO.

GAO supports Congress in meeting its constitutional responsibilities and helps improve the performance and ensure the accountability of the federal government for the benefit of the American people, in this instance, veterans in America. GAO's work includes oversight of federal programs; insight into ways to make government more efficient, effective, ethical and equitable; and foresight of long-term trends and challenges. GAO's reports, testimonies, legal decisions and opinions make a difference for Congress and the Nation.⁵

This final recommendation is a result of having thought of this over and over but in the end; it may be something that Congress might consider on the national insofar as the delivery of healthcare and other benefits to our veterans living in rural America and Alaska, especially in the Alaska Native villages.

I incorporated the two resolutions that were passed by the delegates of the 2007 AFN Convention in Fairbanks, Alaska as part of my statement.

I thank you for allowing me to submit this statement; I ask that my oral and written comments be incorporated into this hearing record.

If you have any questions concerning my statement, please feel free to ask them.

⁵ <http://www.gao.gov/>

ALASKA FEDERATION OF NATIVES

2007 ANNUAL CONVENTION

RESOLUTION 07-02

TITLE: WELCOMING HOME THE 1st, 2nd, AND 3RD BATTALION 297TH
ARMY NATIONAL GUARD

WHEREAS: The Alaska Natives, on a per capita basis, have one of the highest, if not
the highest number of their members serving in active duty in the U. S.
Armed Forces; and

WHEREAS: The Alaska Natives also serve in great numbers in the Alaska Army
National Guard; and

WHEREAS: The members of the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Battalion 297th Army National Guard
were called up to active duty in October of 2006; and

WHEREAS: These members of the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Battalion 297th Army National
Guard were deployed to Kuwait, Afghanistan, and Iraq, under the
Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF); served to protect this nation honorably;
and

WHEREAS: These members of the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Battalion 297th Army National
Guard who were deployed to overseas have returned safely from their
deployment under OIF and many of them have returned to their villages
throughout Alaska; and

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Delegates to the 2007 Annual
Convention of the Alaska Federation of Natives hereby extend their
gratitude to the returning members of the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Battalion 297th
Army National Guard; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Delegates of the 2007 Annual Convention of the
Alaska Federation of Natives hereby extends their deepest and warmest
welcome to the returning members of the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Battalion 297th
Army National Guard and wish them the best in all their future endeavors.

SUBMITTED BY: AFN BOARD OF DIRECTORS

CONVENTION ACTION: PASSED BY UNANIMOUS
CONSENT



ALASKA FEDERATION OF NATIVES

2007 ANNUAL CONVENTION

RESOLUTION 07-25

TITLE: HEALTHCARE FACILITIES IN RURAL ALASKA AND VA CARE FOR VETERANS LIVING IN RURAL ALASKA

WHEREAS: Active duty soldiers in the United States Armed Forces are promised healthcare and other benefits upon their exit from active duty; and

WHEREAS: Veterans living in rural Alaska are required to travel to Anchorage and other urban settings for their initial evaluations for their benefits; and

WHEREAS: Rural veterans must pay for transportation costs to and from their villages out of their own pockets; and

WHEREAS: These veterans may not have financial resources to pay transportation and other costs associated with their initial evaluations; and

WHEREAS: There are healthcare facilities in rural regional centers in hub communities such as Bethel, Nome, Kotzebue, Barrow, Dillingham and others; and

WHEREAS: The Indian Health Service and the U.S Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) have a memorandum of agreement on addressing the needs of Alaska Native/American Indians and Native Hawaiians; and,

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED by the Delegates to the 2007 Annual Convention of the Alaska Federation of Natives, Inc., that AFN urges VA to authorize healthcare facilities in rural Alaska to treat veterans living in rural Alaska for healthcare issues associated with their time in active duty in the U.S. Armed Forces.

SUBMITTED BY: ASSOCIATION OF VILLAGE COUNCIL PRESIDENTS

COMMITTEE ACTION: DO PASS, TIER 1

CONVENTION ACTION: PASSED

