IV. PROGRAMS AND OPPORTUNITIES WITH POTENTIAL TO EMPLOY ALASKA NATIVES

The previous chapter looked at the success of a number of private and public efforts to hire more Natives for existing jobs. This chapter examines the potential of various private and government programs for creating more jobs for Natives.

Private Businesses and Regional Corporations

Bethel Native Corporation’s Proposed Contract with DOD

Background

McLean Research is a private corporation partly owned by the Bethel Native Corporation. It recently proposed contracting with the Department of Defense (DOD) to assist in converting print manuals into electronic data accessible on computers. That proposal was ultimately rejected, but we believe the idea remains sound: for some electronic services, Native organizations in rural Alaska could be competitive with organizations anywhere in the country. The background that follows is largely extracted (with some modifications) from the corporation’s proposal to DOD.

In FY 99, DOD plans to convert the paper maintenance manuals for various aircraft, ships, and other heavy equipment to Interactive Electronic Technical Manuals (IETM). IETM is an important component of DOD’s commitment to cost savings and to the Navy’s commitment, under OP-O4, to replace 80 percent of hard copy technical information repositories with digital data bases. Initial tests indicate that IETM will result in substantial cost savings for DOD—such as reducing the costs of maintaining tech manuals by 35 percent and reducing repair time by 25 percent.

Interactive Electronic Technical Manuals (IETMs) are the result of a process in which cumbersome paper tech manuals for sophisticated military equipment are scanned into electronic format and then converted into a user-friendly interactive mode that enables technicians to service and repair equipment more efficiently. As long as the conversion can be done in cost efficiently, it will produce significant savings for the military, first by reducing the cost of storing and maintaining the bulky paper tech manuals and second by reducing repair time and unnecessary parts replacement.

Employing residents of remote Alaska Native communities to do this work would be possible for two reasons. First, the scanning and conversion work no longer requires high-priced engineers and technicians. High-school graduates with computer keyboard skills, a basic familiarity with tech manuals, and several weeks of training can do the work. Second, once the tech manuals are scanned into the computers, the conversion work can be done in any location that can receive and send information electronically—which is now virtually the entire world. Thus, for the first time, it costs no more to do the work in Bethel than it would to have it done next door to where the scanning took place. Third, Congress has granted
Alaska Native corporations and tribes unique SBA 8(a) rights. So the U.S. Navy is able to award a sole source contract to Bethel, whose subsidiary, MRC, is an 8(a) certified firm—thereby permitting directed contracts to insure that the work goes to the targeted populations.

The FY 99 project was to have proceeded as follows: The IETM software would have been licensed to McLean Research (MRC). MRC’s office in Virginia is staffed by experts in computer technology, who would have created the protocol. They would also have managed the communication interface and trained the Alaska Natives and American Indians doing the actual conversion work. MRC’s headquarters, located in Bethel, Alaska, would have hired and trained 60 of its Alaska Native shareholders to perform the review and clean-up work that must be carried out after the software automatically converts the scanned tech manual. The scanning portion of the work would have been performed on the Cheyenne River Sioux Indian Reservation in South Dakota, where the tribe has recently established a scanning enterprise. Like Bethel, the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation suffers from very high unemployment. Approximately 65 percent of the appropriated funds would have been spent on salaries for employees in Bethel and Cheyenne River.

Despite the rejection of the first proposal, MRC believes there is still potential. In subsequent years, converting the remainder of DOD’s tech manuals will generate several thousand jobs. BNC anticipates that many more jobs will be created as a result of conversions by other government agencies and private sector firms. The chief executive officer of MRC sees these new jobs as differing from the typical dead-end, minimum wage jobs that are often offered to Indian communities. The skills employees develop doing the conversion work can gradually be augmented by advanced training and extended education to create a skilled labor pool with capabilities to perform systems integration, computer systems maintenance, computer programming, and other highly skilled and valuable computer-related work.

Recently, Bill Gates of Microsoft and other leaders in the software industry have been lobbying Congress and the White House to ease restrictions on immigration for people with computer programming and other telecommunications skills. However, the residents of the remote Alaska Native villages and Indian reservations can meet this demand, because with electronic data transmission and remote communications technology, location is no longer a factor in this type of work. Consequently, Alaska Natives and American Indians employed on this kind of project may no longer have to choose between living in their home villages or leaving to obtain long-term, decent-paying jobs. They will be able to do both.
Employment
McLean Research anticipated that the first conversion task would have created 60 information technology jobs for residents of a remote Alaska Native village and 15 jobs for residents of a remote reservation in South Dakota. According to the chief executive officer, converting all of DOD’s technical manuals would generate several thousand jobs for Alaska Natives and American Indians in remote communities while continuing to save money for DOD.

Recruitment and Training
Bethel Native Corporation would have been responsible for recruitment and McLean Research for training Native Alaskans to review and clean up the scanned text.

Impediments to Increasing Native Hire and Retention
Because the proposal was rejected before hiring started, we can’t assess what the impediments to Native hire might have been.

Analysis
As it stands now, McLean Research won’t be converting DOD print manuals to electronic form. But the concept is still very promising. The SBA 8(a) status of tribes and regional corporations positions them extremely well for work of this type, which is likely to be a growth business for several years. Not only is DOD converting its hard-copy manuals to electronic format but many other government agencies are also doing so. Large corporations have been doing this for years. In short, the fact that the first such proposal was rejected does not mean there is no potential for future projects involving rural Native organizations and rural Native residents.

Cooperation between Native Organizations and Labor Unions:
Project Labor Agreements

Nome Area Sites Project
In the early 1990s IT Corporation (ITC) contracted with the U.S. Corps of Engineers to clean up a number of former military sites around Nome and in a number of remote locations in northwest Alaska. To promote local hire, ITC in 1994 reached a project labor agreement with the local laborers union and other unions, including the teamsters and the operating engineers. The clean-up went on for three years.

Working with representatives of those unions, and with the Tribal Employment Rights Officer in Nome, ITC began interviewing local residents from Nome, Elim, Teller, and other area communities. It then hired 54 local residents, 90 percent of whom were Alaska Natives. The Native workers represented two regional corporations and six village corporations. The unions trained local workers as necessary. Native corporations helped by providing job placement, housing, and other services.
ITC reports that workers who were local residents “demonstrated a distinct advantage . . . in their knowledge of the land, rivers, and topography,” reducing costs and increasing efficiency in moving to and from remote sites. It also reports that its Alaska Native work force “demonstrated tremendous innovation and ingenuity” in transporting debris from the sites and repairing and modifying equipment in the field.

The local unions worked under a cost-plus fixed fee contract. Over three years, local workers and local-hire administrative employees collected more than $2 million in wages. The unions collected $400,000 in fringe benefits and dues. ITC gives much of the credit for successful local hire to the local union leaders in Nome, and concludes that the state government, other unions, and Native organization could look to this project as “a model for the success of local hire.”

Galena Sub-Region Agreement
The laborers’ and operators’ unions and the Galena Sub-Region villages of Galena, Ruby, Huslia, Kaltag, Nulato, and Koyukuk are currently negotiating a project labor agreement. The villages are represented by the Tanana Chiefs Conference’s legal department. TCC has already passed a resolution supporting the agreement. The basic idea is that the tribes and the unions will develop a comprehensive plan, and that tribal representatives and village councils will then approach all new businesses and developments entering the village with the tribal/union plan. Such a plan addresses several concerns in rural areas:

Local Hire
Tribes currently have Tribal Employment Rights Organizations (TEROs) but they have no means of enforcing local hire. If a project labor agreement were in place, the union could enforce the TERO. The union also has a more rigorous definition of “local resident” than that allowed by Alaska law. Under union regulations, there is a special local hire preference for places in Alaska not connected to the road system. In such cases, the definition of a local resident is someone who has lived within a 50-mile radius for at least six months prior to the beginning of a project.

Training
Union members are eligible for free training through the union training trusts. Union training programs are industry driven. The unions attempt to get proposed project lists from agencies a year or two ahead of actual construction and then tailor their training programs to the specific needs of the job. They pay the cost of flying rural union members from their villages to Fairbanks for training and they also pay for their food and housing. The training programs are usually two weeks.

Accrual of Benefits
Many rural residents work sporadically as projects present themselves and thus never accrue medical or pension benefits. The laborers’ and operators’ unions both have the
same pension requirements. A worker must work 250 hours a year for annual pension credit and workers vest in the union pension fund after five years. If a project labor agreement were in place, a person could work on a different project each year (including working for tribal government) and still accrue benefits and vest in the pension fund.

Opportunities for Employment Outside the Village

Under union hall rules in Fairbanks, a worker who has once worked for a contractor can be recalled by that contractor without being physically present for the call in the union hall. This rule would allow rural residents to avoid the expense of flying to Fairbanks and getting a place to stay in order to find work.

Analysis

Project labor agreements can help overcome two of the major obstacles to Native hire in rural areas: lack of training and lack of jobs. Such agreements work by bringing together tribes and labor unions to identify all the projects planned for a region, and then getting local hire provisions into place before projects begin. Once these groups know what kinds of jobs are on the horizon, the unions can train local workers specifically to fill those jobs.

Successful agreements do not come easily. They require that tribes expand their thinking about “local hire” to include not only their own tribal members but also members of other tribes in the region. Each tribal council also has to be willing to approach new businesses moving into the area and point out the existence of tribal labor agreements. The unions, on the other hand, have to educate local residents about the benefits of union membership and explain why unions collect dues. Unions also need to maintain local representatives in rural areas. Many Alaska Natives who were union members during construction of the trans-Alaska pipeline in the 1970s later lost trust in the unions because a lack of union jobs in rural areas meant they were unable to vest in union pension plans.

Federal Programs and Policies

Background

The National Guard in Alaska has played a central role in the development of Alaska Native leadership. The guard grew out of the need, during World War II, to monitor the Alaskan coast for Japanese incursions. The first Alaskan Scouts to volunteer not only performed a critical national function; they also constituted a cadre of Native leaders who had first-hand experience with Western organizations. Opening the officer corps to Natives in 1947 provided Western leadership training to individuals who were to become leaders in various Native communities. Armed with detailed understandings of how Western policies and organizations operate gained through their experience in the guard, leaders such as Eben Hopson, Caleb Pungowiyi, and John Shaeffer were prepared to negotiate issues of critical importance to their communities and provide leadership to newly created, Western-style organizations.
Several factors conspired in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s to erode the importance and popularity of the guard among Alaska Natives. The Vietnam War was a demoralizing experience that took some of the luster off the guard for members and potential recruits. In addition, the corporate structures created by ANCSA competed directly with the guard for leaders and leaders-to-be. At the same time, the guard began requiring college degrees for officer candidates and became less hospitable to older officers who had enlisted before formal educational requirements were raised. Finally, in the 1990s, the ending of the Cold War resulted in reductions in forces throughout the military, the guard included. It also removed the traditional mission of the guard: to be the first line of observation and defense against Soviet attack.

Employment
According to the Alaska Army National Guard, membership peaked at 3,300 in 1989—about 41 percent of which was in rural Alaska. In November of that year, Congress started to disassemble the U.S. military. The guard nationwide abruptly switched gears, shedding units and members. Massachusetts alone lost over 11,000 guardsmen.

The Alaska guard today is up to its authorized strength of 2,020, some 750—or 37 percent—of whom are Alaska Natives. In other words, the guard today has 603 fewer Alaska Natives than it did when the drawdown began in 1989. In addition, very few of the current officers are Natives.

Recruitment and Training
According to recent reports in the Anchorage Daily News and the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner, recruiting new guard members on the North Slope is proving difficult. This is due in part to the fact that good-paying jobs are easier to find in that region. Recruitment may differ by region, however. Apparently, in Southwest Alaska—where villages are considerably poorer than those on the North Slope—recruitment is easier.

The current requirement that officers be college graduates has seriously restricted the number of Alaska Natives among the officer corps—and is likely to continue to do so.

Impediments to Increasing Native Hire and Retention
Among the current generation, the guard appears to lack the appeal it had for their fathers and grandfathers. This may be due in part to the apparent failure of the guard to articulate a mission to replace the one that animated the Scout Battalions of the previous generation. As noted above, in some parts of the state, the guard is no longer one of the few employers offering reasonable wages and benefits. In addition, given the educational requirements for officers, the opportunities for advancement are limited. For Native youth who are pursuing college degrees and who have multiple career opportunities, the guard appears to hold little attraction. Finally, some rural informants told us that the guard’s drug testing requirements may discourage some young people from joining.
Analysis
Given the overall downsizing of the military and the college degree requirement for the officer corps, increasing opportunities for Alaska Natives in the guard seems unlikely. According to the Alaska Army National Guard, the guard is constantly looking for ways to increase its recruitment of Alaska Natives. It has stepped up its efforts to attract young Native men and women into ROTC at the University of Alaska Fairbanks—although results to date have been disappointing. Members of the Alaska guard believe that more qualified young people would consider the guard if Native leaders and organizations promoted membership, as they reportedly did in days past. This may be true. But it also may be true that the guard needs to find a way to appeal to the current generation. Current recruiters may know little of the rich tradition of the Scouts and the role of the guard in incubating so many Native leaders. Finally, the Alaska guard did itself no favors with Alaska Natives when it increased the educational requirements for the officer corps.

Hazardous Waste Removal and Abatement

Background
Recently, opportunities in the field of hazardous materials clean-up and abatement have opened for Alaska Natives. In the mid-1980s, asbestos was determined to be a health threat to children, particularly in school buildings. Federal law required that every school in the nation be inspected for asbestos and that school districts prepare written plans for asbestos removal. This law came with funding for training of workers to inspect for asbestos and to abate the problem. Alaska Natives were trained in these tasks and worked on the asbestos problem in Alaska schools.

Today, needs exist for workers trained at various levels to deal with hazardous materials generally. Teams have been trained under a number of programs throughout Alaska. At the same time, when hazardous materials are spilled, the resulting clean-up jobs can go to local contractors who hire local workers. Those involved in cleaning up the oil spill in Dutch Harbor in 1997 included many who were trained in rural Alaska and who were Alaska Native, including the on-site supervisor. Yukana Corporation, a subsidiary of the Louden Village Tribal Council, contracted to send 48 people to Dutch Harbor for 21 days to work on a spill caused by a freighter grounding.

Employment
No data available.

Recruitment and Training
The Alaska Health Project, an Anchorage-based non-profit organization, estimates that it provides 4,500 to 5,000 hours of training each year in the management of hazardous materials. Alaska Natives make up a majority of the targeted minority training population—and 95 percent of those trained have employment opportunities. The intensity and technical aspects of this training, requiring detailed reading of technical materials, makes it challenging for Alaska Natives with lower levels of formal education. However, motivated trainees can get training materials in advance of classes to have additional time for study. The instructors are aware of the cultural
differences among Alaska population groups and emphasize realistic hands-on classroom experiences, minimizing time spent on video and written presentations.

Impediments to Increasing Native Hire and Retention
As noted above, spill clean-up work typically goes to local contractors who hire local workers. Thus, if spills occur in areas where the population is primarily Alaska Native, local hire works to their benefit. Spills in non-Native areas, however, are typically cleaned up by others. Also, there may be a barrier to Native hire, if contractors are not aware that trained Native hazard materials specialists are available.

Analysis
Because of their knowledge of their environment, Alaska Natives have an advantage over workers from elsewhere. The personal protective equipment used in hazardous materials removal and abatement is not designed for cold or remote site work. Knowing how to make these protective systems work in Alaska is a specialty that could be applied elsewhere in the world when there are spills in winter conditions.

Co-Management and Marine Mammal Research: Section 119 of Marine Mammal Protection Act and the Migratory Bird Treaty

Background
In 1994, Congress re-authorized and amended the federal Marine Mammal Protection Act. The Indigenous People’s Council for Marine Mammals, a coalition of representatives of Alaska Native groups concerned about the continued protection of marine mammals and the right to hunt them, pressed for the inclusion of a new section, Section 119. That section was approved and now specifically allows for the Secretaries of the Departments of Commerce and Interior to “enter into cooperative agreements with Alaska Native organizations to conserve marine mammals and provide co-management of subsistence use by Alaska Natives.”

Under such cooperative agreements, Native organizations can be awarded grants that can be used to collect data, monitor harvests, and generally participate in research as well as establish co-management structures. For the most part, the co-management structures are the various Alaska Native commissions, committees, and councils that have been the link between the hunters and governmental agencies and researchers. The federal language in this section is clear and allows for Alaska Natives to be employed and actively engaged in marine mammal stewardship. Currently the Alaska Sea Otter Commission, the Eskimo Walrus Commission, and the Nanuuq Commission receive Section 119 funding.

From this Section 119 start, the concept of co-management has expanded. The recently negotiated Migratory Bird Treaty with Canada and Mexico also contains language specifying co-management with aboriginal people and “including all users meaningfully in the continued management of migratory birds.” Likewise, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game has been working with local Alaska Native groups on the co-management of the Western Arctic Caribou Herd.
In addition to co-management, Alaska Native organizations have been successfully receiving congressional appropriations or contracts from federal agencies for their own research on marine mammals. The Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission, the Alaska Beluga Whale Committee, the Alaska Native Harbor Seal Commission, and the Alaska Sea Otter Commission have supported staff and research projects for a number of years on congressional appropriations. The Alaska Native Harbor Seal Commission has had great success in securing contract funds from the National Marine Fisheries Service for a biosampling program and will be receiving a competitive research award from the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Council. As interest in and funding for studying the declines in some populations in the Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska grow, the potential for such research and the involvement of Alaska Natives also increases.

The Alaska Native Science Commission is now receiving funding to build links between Alaska Natives and academic and government researchers. The three-fold intent of the program is to engage Alaska Natives in research, foster new Alaska Native scientists, and assure that science provides information to Alaska Natives in a meaningful manner. The commission has been successful in initiating research Alaska Natives want and will be hiring people to conduct that work. There is rapidly growing interest in Arctic, Bering Sea, and North Pacific research, including legislation to direct research funding to these areas. There is a need to have many research programs running and closely linked to various Alaska Native communities. This is an expanding new area for employment. It may open doors for some well-trained Alaska Natives—which may in turn open opportunities for others to move into new jobs.

Employment
No data yet.

Recruitment and Training
No data yet. The increasing opportunities for Alaska Natives to contract for and conduct marine species research and to co-manage wildlife suggests that Native organizations may want to support efforts to help Native students earn degrees in biology and game management. This also has implications for the K-12 curriculum. Currently, the curriculum in most schools that serve predominantly Alaska Natives mirrors that found elsewhere. Rural school boards may need to be encouraged to examine the suitability of the existing curriculum, in light of both traditional knowledge about marine and game resources and the expanding opportunities in research and management.

Impediments to Increasing Native Hire and Retention
These remain to be seen. We can anticipate that the lack of formal degrees in the biological and game management fields will serve to prevent Alaska Natives from assuming higher-level positions in organizations or activities that require such degrees.

Analysis
The concept, legal precedent, language, and structures for increased Alaska Native participation in co-management and in research are falling into place. As funding becomes available, jobs for Alaska Natives should increase. As noted above, Native organizations should examine
opportunities available to Alaska Natives to earn the formal degrees required for research and game management. Low graduation rates of Alaska Natives in the relevant fields are due to a number of factors, but preparation in secondary schools is one of the most critical requirements for post-secondary success—and one that lends itself to efforts to improve both curriculum and instruction.

Community Service: AmeriCorps and VISTA

The federal Corporation for National Service sponsors three community service programs: VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America), AmeriCorps, and NCCC (National Civilian Conservation Corps). Below we look at the potential for Native employment in AmeriCorps and VISTA.¹

AmeriCorps

Now in its fourth year, AmeriCorps is the national service program that allows people 18 and older, from all backgrounds, to earn money toward education or training by serving their communities for a year. Some participants choose to be in the program for an additional year; participation is limited to two years. AmeriCorps members perform community services ranging from housing renovation to child immunization to neighborhood policing. Currently, more than 40,000 AmeriCorps members serve in over 600 programs across the country.

Two AmeriCorps programs operate in Alaska: (1) an environmental awareness program in the villages, employing 25 AmeriCorps volunteers annually; and (2) a child development program employing nine AmeriCorps volunteers in the villages and one in Anchorage. So there are 34 positions in the village and one in Anchorage. The child development program is integrated into the Headstart programs. Volunteers are trained and receive a monthly stipend of $992. At the end of the year, they receive an education award of $4,725 for education or training.

Funding for the environmental program is one third from the Corporation for National Service, one third from EPA, and one third from RuralCap. Funds for the child development program are one half from the Corporation for National Service and one half from RuralCap. The environmental protection program works closely with the EPA’s Indian General Assistance Program, which currently employs 35 environmental specialists in the villages, working on strategies to prevent pollution. In October 1998, the number of environmental specialists will increase to 85. These specialists plan and organize, while the AmeriCorps volunteers organize the villages to do the cleanup and teaching.

¹ It’s not yet clear whether federal community service programs could employ Native welfare recipients, who will be required to hold jobs, take training, or do community service under terms of welfare reform (as described in Chapter II).
Recruitment and Training
Recruitment for the program occurs each fall. Every village tribal and city council throughout the state is sent a recruitment package. The environmental program only recruits tribal members, because of EPA regulations, and the day care program is recruiting only from villages with Headstart programs.

Employment
The environmental awareness program receives 85 to 90 applications yearly and employs 25. The child development program receives about 30 applications and employs 10. Of these 35 AmeriCorps members, roughly 30 to 32—85 to 90 percent—are Alaska Natives.

VISTA
The Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) program undertakes a variety of community service projects nationwide. The focus of VISTA in Alaska is rural economic development projects, particularly where the needs are greatest—which tend to be in the smaller communities. Current projects are in Marshall, Huslia, Metlakatla, Noorvik, Cordova, and Kipnuk. A project is scheduled to start in Coffman Cove in November 1998. Projects for Dillingham, Port Graham, and Aniak are currently being planned.

Twelve VISTA positions exist, but rarely are all available at the same time. Projects are selected from proposals submitted to the Alaska Department of Community and Regional Affairs. Projects can employ Alaska Natives, but the community determines who it wishes to hire and does the hiring. VISTA workers are paid a stipend and communities are required to provide housing. VISTA workers are considered federal employees and are subject to the Hatch Act (that is, they cannot engage in political activity of any kind). The allocation of VISTA workers to the states is based on the state population—which is why the number of VISTA workers in Alaska is limited.

Volunteers receive a stipend of $900 a month, plus health and child care. At the end of the year, they receive an educational award of $4,725, which they can use to pay past or future loans—or they can instead choose a cash stipend of $1,200.

Impediments to Increasing Native Hire and Retention
The VISTA director emphasized that the program is really full-time, 40-hour per week volunteerism. Hours are flexible and accommodating to people’s schedules, but VISTA work does preclude other employment. Specific qualifications for applicants are set by the communities applying for the VISTA workers.

Analysis
AmeriCorps and VISTA potentially provide entry-level job experience for a few Alaska Natives—35 in AmeriCorps and 12 in VISTA. Expansion of these programs is limited because funding is pegged to state population.
State Policies and Programs

The VPSO Program and Potential Expansion

Background
The state’s Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) program began in the early 1980s as a means of providing rural Alaska communities with needed public safety support services. The VPSO program was designed to train and employ village residents as first responders to public safety emergencies—such as search and rescue, fire protection, emergency medical assistance, and law enforcement support.

Since the program’s inception, the number of communities served by VPSOs has fluctuated; on average, 94 trained officers have handled almost 10,000 calls for service each year. Currently, there are 124 recognized VPSO positions, but due to lack of money only 84 are funded. The 84 communities with VPSOs were selected based on a study of local crime rates, types of crimes, and other measures of the need for local public safety services. Some conditions that may exclude a village from qualifying for VPSO funding include the lack of office space, equipment, and facilities (such as detainment cells) which VPSOs need to carry out their duties.

The state legislature funds the program through a separate budget request unit with the Division of State Troopers’ budget. The funds are then awarded to participating regional non-profit corporations through grant requests. According to the Village Public Safety Officer Program Field Manual, “The primary purpose of regional contracting is to place the local administration of the program into the hands of an organization more aware of the specific needs of the areas to be served and to deal with a workable number of grants while retaining a certain amount of regional flexibility. Each non-profit, with the concurrence of the Division of State Troopers, selects which communities will participate.”

Once a community has been selected, that community—with the assistance of the state troopers and the non-profit corporation—is responsible for the selection and the daily activities of the VPSO. The non-profit group arranges for all salary payments, based on the submission of time sheets for the communities. Group insurance plans, retirement plans, and maintenance of full financial accountability of grant funds is also the responsibility of the contractor.

Expanding Duties
Because parole supervision is unavailable in the villages, parolees are currently sent to regional centers. Often these parolees get back into trouble with alcohol-related crimes in the regional centers. During the 1998 legislative session, Senator Rick Halford added money to the budget for appropriations for a pilot project with the Bristol Bay Native Association (BBNA). The funds have been appropriated through a grant to the association, which will use the money to train VPSOs to handle probation cases and to increase VPSO pay. If this project succeeds, Senator Halford plans to work with rural legislators to implement the program statewide in the next fiscal year.
Employment
A very high percentage of the 84 VPSOs are Alaska Native. Some rural villages rely on locally-hired Village Police Officers (VPOs); other villages have both a VPSO and one or more VPOs, who assist the VPSO. The North Slope Borough has its own Department of Public Safety, which hires public safety officers for placement in local villages. Most North Slope officers are non-Natives who are hired from out of state and who have already received law enforcement training and certification before they're hired.

Recruitment and Training
The non-profit organization that contracts to administer the VPSO program is also responsible for recruitment. The VPSOs are trained at the state Public Safety Academy in Sitka. The nine-week training takes place annually in January and February. The curriculum and training may vary according to what previous training the VPSOs have; however, basic training focuses on how to deal with common offenses such as domestic violence and alcohol-related crimes. A certified course of instruction includes use of the asp or wand, which is a collapsible baton, and the chemical spray O-CAP. These are the VPSOs only means of protection; they are not allowed to carry guns or any other weapons.

Impediments to Increasing Native Hire and Retention
Retaining VPSOs appears to be a major problem that also forecloses the possibility of advancement for many. According to a captain in the state troopers who is responsible for the VPSO program, high stress and burnout are common among VPSOs, particularly in villages where they receive little support. This stress is due in part to the fact that VPSOs often must deal with close family members. The current turnover rate is 42 per year. Not only is there pressure from the village to work around-the-clock, seven days a week, but VPSOs must also work for three supervisors. In villages with only one VPSO, the pressure is especially intense because the VPSO is not only expected to work all the time but also to have a wide range of responsibilities.

Although they are expected to work very long hours, VPSOs’ pay is relatively low and they cannot collect overtime pay, according to our informants. The lack of retirement benefits is another barrier which results in high turnover. VPSOs are apparently (although this is not entirely clear) ineligible for the Public Employees Retirement System (PERS). Although VPSOs perform at the same or higher level of work as firemen, correctional officers, and police officers, they are apparently not able to participate in PERS because a state statute excludes non-profit employees from these benefits. There should be a way for VPSOs to participate, so they could earn retirement and other benefits—as do jail guards, police officers, and others in public safety.

Analysis
Given the observation that VPSOs are already under a great deal of pressure, due in part to their heavy workloads and the range of responsibilities they are expected to shoulder, assigning them yet another task—overseeing parolees—seems an odd way to address their problems. Certainly increasing their pay seems a good idea. But they remain in low-paying jobs without retirement.
benefits. To make these positions more attractive would appear to require creating a benefit package and rethinking the distribution of responsibilities. Expanding the number of VPSOs in some villages—or making the position one that can be shared—may be necessary. Pushing for increasing the number of VPSOs, while simultaneously improving wages and benefits and establishing more flexible work arrangements, could provide additional employment for rural Natives.

**Rural Telecommunications**

*Background*

The long-distance carrier GCI built 50 rural station centers with advanced technology digital quality and single hop calling in rural Alaska. GCI employs one person part-time in each of these locations. These representatives are not involved in the technical side of the station centers but rather answer questions and maintain the physical plants. GCI also provides 130 to 140 location links to Internet service for the rural schools. GCI is linked to the Internet server in each school and all schools are connected to the Internet. Eventually, the health clinics and village corporation offices will also be hooked up.

According to GCI, the company conducted a survey of a “couple of thousand people” a few years back, to find out how many people used personal computers in their homes. Amazingly, the company found that the level of personal computer penetration is higher in rural areas than in Anchorage. GCI is developing the capability to deliver a quality public Internet product, because current digital technology does not use satellites effectively. The company’s goal is to provide a level of service comparable to that in urban areas, at affordable prices and without subsidies. The networking technology already exists in rural areas and will be even more pervasive in the future. Clearly, there will be opportunities in local area networks for maintenance jobs as well as opportunities for applications and software development.

*Employment*

GCI could not tell us exactly how many Alaska Natives it employs, but did say that most of its representatives in rural Native areas are Native.

*Recruitment and Training*

GCI’s rural services division is starting a self-paced, high-school level technical education program in cooperation with the Alaska Department of Education and CISCO Systems, which makes 80 percent of the routing equipment. The program will require two years in the classroom with lots of hands-on experience, followed by two years of on-the-job training, before students can graduate. The Alaska Vocation Technical Center in Seward will be training the teachers for the program, and the actual program was scheduled to start in the fall of 1998.

After students have completed the two-year vocational training part of the program, GCI will provide the on-the-job experiences for the students to complete the last two years. GCI will try to
hire as many graduates of the program as possible. GCI will also be working with others, like the National Bank of Alaska, to identify other possible employers for graduates of the program.

**Impediments to Increasing Native Hire and Retention**
Like many non-Natives around the state, Alaska Natives lack only training to be able to qualify for jobs in the telecommunications sector.

**Analysis**
Given the dramatic and rapid changes that have just begun in telecommunications in the rural areas, the opportunities in this field seem very promising. Training programs such as that offered by GCI need to be made known to rural resident and rural school districts. School districts may need to be pressured to insure they participate in this type of training and actively recruit students into programs such as that offered by GCI. REAA school boards should be encouraged to request from their administrators information on the types of computer and telecommunications technology training courses and programs available to students. These school boards also should scrutinize job descriptions for new teachers, to determine whether or not technological proficiency is a qualification for teachers at all levels and in all subjects, not just for those jobs that are technical. Students need multiple opportunities across the school year to become comfortable with computers and telecommunications.