

WEATHERING WINTER 2008/09

The Departments of Health & Social Services and Commerce, Community & Economic Development

Host Site: Anchorage, Alaska August 20, 2008

Urgent, crisis-level testimony during the 2008 Legislative Special Session hearings on energy costs made clear the need to hear from rural Alaskans, who face significantly more expensive fuel costs during a season that is hardest to endure away from affordable transportation, food sources, and other goods and services. The August Legislative Health Caucus examined the impacts of high energy prices and how several organizations around the state are responding. Presentations were heard from a number of key State entities: the Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management; the Department of Health and Social Services; the Division of Community and Regional Affairs; and the Alaska State Community Services Commission.

Presenters:

John Madden, Director of the Alaska Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management | Fort Richardson

Corrine Olson, RN, MS, Deputy Chief of the Alaska Section of Public Nursing | Juneau

Joe McLaughlin, MD, MPH, Chief Epidemiologist, Division of Public Health Section of Epidemiology | Anchorage

Margy Hughes, Associate Coordinator for the Alaska Community Services Commission | Anchorage

Scott Young, Director of SAGA | Juneau

Ellen Kazary, Community Development Supervisor, RurAL CAP | Anchorage

Alaskans Face Significant Winter Hazards

Director John Madden, Alaska Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management

The Division of Homeland Security closely monitors conditions that endanger the ‘homeland’ and its people. Alaska faces a range of hazards greater than any other state. These hazards fall into two categories:

- Emergencies that can happen at any time: natural disasters, terrorist activities, etc.
- Seasonal hazards that are normally predictable by season: spring flooding; summer fires and floods; fall sea-storms; winter extreme temperatures, snow, and late-winter fuel shortages.

In the past, fuel shortages were mostly reported in March or April, as seasonal deliveries ran out. Approximately three years ago, however, fuel shortages began happening across the year. Where there would once be four to five shortages in early spring, there are now more likely to be ten to twelve emergencies experienced throughout the year.

Fuel emergencies generally fall into two categories. In some cases a community has wagered, hoping for good weather, while holding off on placing a new fuel order because of the price tag. In other instances, fuel runs out because a vendor did not deliver: the vendor was unable to make the delivery due to difficulties getting to the community or found a better price at another place.



In both cases a fuel shortage is often not reported by the community until there are only 24-36 hours of fuel left. In these situations, a lack of local monitoring makes prevention much harder. The ability to act exists within the community of suppliers, transporters, and state agencies responsible to avert such shortages. Unfortunately, without proper warning a disaster in the making may not become apparent until life is at risk. The powers and authorities of the Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management are formidable in responding to protect life and safety when a disaster has happened or is imminent. When a disaster is inevitable, however, this is not the case.

The Cost of Emergency Response Is Usually Much More Expensive Than Prevention

The primary emergency response methods are to evacuate or shelter those in danger. In rural fuel shortage, sheltering is out of the question and evacuation expensive. The loss of energy has a costly cascade effect: loss of heat means freezing pipes as well as dwindling mobility and power to run basic services. Without heat, this infrastructure itself becomes at risk to damage.

Emergency management works on monitoring three related concepts: Hazard, Risk and Threat. A Hazard is something that can go wrong, the Risk is the probability of a Hazard occurring. "Every community that imports energy is part of the Hazard. Those that must import it from greater distances or for longer periods in bulk are at greater risk."

2008: The Outlook So Far

In this past year, the issue has not just been the high cost of energy: the Division has had willing buyers unable to establish contact or contract with a willing seller. All of the communities that have asked for assistance have been helped by aligning a willing buyer with an able seller. State loans and grants are available; money itself is often not the problem, but complications of contract and questionable delivery. High costs are not the only factor in determining whether a community gets adequate fuel. Advanced notification of shortages is important as it allows the Department to plan for what problems could be potentially faced should disaster be imminent. Being properly notified and thus appropriately staged is incredibly important.

Weathering Winter 2008/09 featured testimony from the following communities:

- *Sand Point*
- *False Pass*
- *King Cove*
- *Fort Yukon*



“Village generators in each of the respective villages will be shut down at night... dealing with emergencies during the nighttime hours... there’s going to be a huge issue there...we won’t be able to use the telemedicine carts for consultation.”

-Marc Dumas, Medical Director, Fort Yukon

The Department of Health and Social Services conducted a statewide Public Health Nursing Assessment, compiling the issues and concerns that community nurses expect to be impacted by high energy prices.



“It’s ultimately going to come down to -- do we put heat in the house or do we buy food? Which in turn will ultimately affect their general health throughout the winter, it’s going to make them more susceptible to illness.”

Senta Lockett,
Nelson Lagoon

Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS)

Corrine Olson, RN, MS, Deputy Chief, Alaska Section of Public Health Nursing

Joe McLaughlin, MD, MPH, State Epidemiologist and Chief, Alaska Section of Epidemiology

The Department of Health and Social Services conducted a statewide Public Health Nursing Assessment, compiling the issues and concerns that rural community nurses expect to be impacted by high energy prices.

Potential Impacts:

- Prices for fresh fruits, vegetables and dairy have become very high. This may lead families to purchase foods of lower nutritional quality.
- May be limiting to Alaskans’ ability to subsistence hunt and fish.
- Decreased tourism and a poor fishing season have significantly impacted individual and business incomes.
- Less home health care services in rural areas.

Specific Behavioral/Social Impacts:

- Special needs and vulnerable populations will be especially impacted and require more resources.
- Current social services systems may be more overwhelmed/paralyzed.
- Families prioritizing food purchases over housing; overcrowding and homelessness increasing, rent costs rising to cover utilities.
- Migration to urban areas causing loss of infrastructure and concern for youth
- Many delaying medical care & medications creating risk for increased illness and costs
- Stress, unemployment & free time causing increased substance abuse and violence
- Exacerbating effect on mental health, depression/anxiety, substance abuse, and intentional injury/suicide

The Assessment also suggested a range of potential solutions to these problems. Key to these were mobilizing and expanding state and community partnerships, building strategies and priorities based on assets and needs.

**Alaska State Community Services Commission;
Department of Commerce, Community &
Economic Development**

Margy Hughes, Associate Coordinator for the Community Services Commission, and **Ellen Kazary** of RurAL CAP's RAVEN program presented an outline of a group of programs providing services throughout Alaska dealing with energy.

The Alaska State Community Service Commission (CSC) oversees five Americorp programs across Alaska. Programs apply for grants through CSC, explaining a need in a community and outlining how Americorp members will be able to address that need. The Rural Alaskan Community Action Program (RurAL CAP) has two energy relief focused programs, BIRCH and RAVEN. SAGA, based in Juneau, formed the ad hoc working group Energy Efficient Lifestyle Solutions (EELS) to address that community's energy crisis in the spring of 2008.

RurAL CAP's Energy Work

The goal of RurAL CAP is to improve the quality of life for low-income Alaskans. Increasingly this has meant addressing the energy burden in rural Alaska, where the cost of energy is usually three times higher than Anchorage or elsewhere. This requires a growing proportion of income used for energy needs, making it more difficult to sustain living in rural Alaska.

Weatherization Program:

Due to increased weatherization funding that started this spring, RurAL CAP can install \$30,000 of weatherization upgrades to 193 eligible homes. On average, weatherization upgrades save 40% on energy bills.

Americorp/VISTA Energy Initiatives:

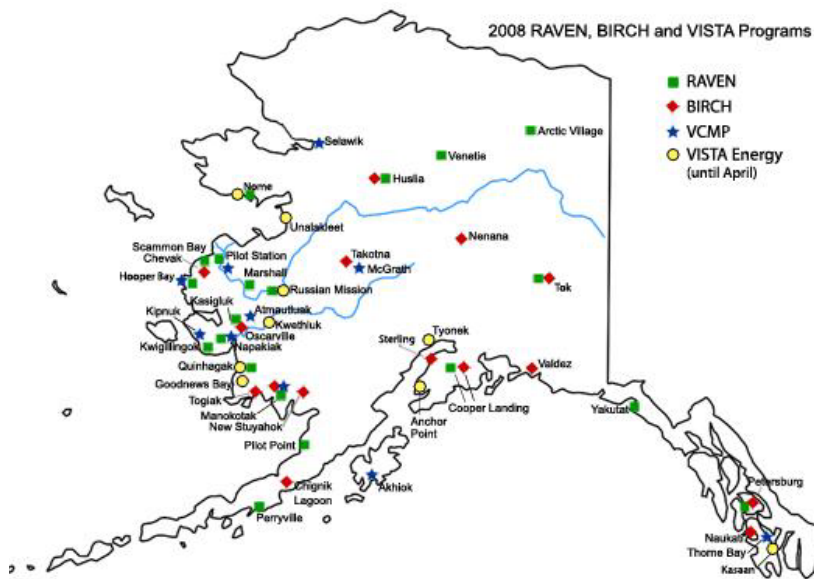
Americorp/VISTA recruits locally, with members hosted by tribal or city councils. These members work within their communities with three goals:

- Educate rural Alaskans about energy conservation and efficiency, as well as renewable energy.
- Strengthen the capacity of councils to address energy priorities.
- Lower the cost of energy.



“Jani has a new baby...She’s at that choice where she either buys food or she buys fuel to keep her house warm. And she sits around a lot of the time in her house with her baby covered with a quilt and blankets because she has to keep her house cool in order to conserve her fuel.”

**-Karen Johnson,
Sand Point**



Currently there are 50 rural-based Americorp/VISTA members per year in communities across the state.

SAGA: Responding to the Juneau Energy Crisis

Scott Young of SAGA in Juneau explained the work in response to the power-line damaged by avalanches near AEL&P’s Snettisham facility caused Juneau’s electric rates to rise dramatically in the second quarter of 2008. SAGA partnered with

Southeast Alaska United Way and the Juneau Commission on Sustainability to find ways to help the elderly, those with physical disabilities, and low-income households to address those rising costs.

“We heard time and time again from the retailers, that they were wanting to offer in-store credit to everyone but were getting to the point where they know that people were not going to be able to pay back the debt and they’re having to say no to their friends and family, which is quite concerning as a social issue.”

--Nicole Grewe

A working group of 15 people was formed - Energy Efficient Lifestyle Solutions (EELS) - to work directly with that target population. The group was led by AnnMarie Ellison, a SAGA-AmeriCorps member. The EELS group received training in basic energy efficiency screening and safe methods of addressing the needs discovered in those screenings (i.e. replacing incandescent light bulbs with fluorescent ones, installing/replacing weather stripping around doors and windows, lowering the temperature setting on water heaters). EELS and United Way also gathered donated fluorescent light bulbs, low-flow shower-heads, and weather stripping from WalMart, Home Depot, and AEL&P.

- 54 households signed-up for the screening and consequent assistance.
- 27 homes were screened; scheduling was the primary barrier.
- The EELS group has decided to suspend the screenings, in light of the improved energy situation and decreased interest, but continue to meet with the intention of getting back to work in the fall.

Division of Community and Regional Affairs (DC&RA)

Nicole Grewe, Ph.D., Development Specialist

Dr. Grewe is part of research group in the Division of Community and Regional Affairs that prepares studies on a timetable that can best inform for policymakers. One of their tasks is to supply comprehensive, statistical information to supplement conventional wisdom and rural anecdotes. This is illustrated in a report Dr. Grewe presented at the forum:

Current Community Conditions: Fuel Prices Across Alaska

First undertaken in 2005, this publication is the product of bi-annual surveys of 100 communities representing cross-section of state. Twice a year, fuel distributors and others in these communities are called with a request on pricing information for fuel and heating oil. At an average of \$5.51 in June 2008, heating fuel prices have increased 50% since the project began monitoring prices in November of 2005. A significant amount of this increase occurred between June 2007 and June 2008.

In addition to collecting prices each survey looks in-depth at one aspect of fuel in Alaska. In the June 2008 update, DC&RA looked at methods of payment accepted by fuel retailers, including: cash, credit card, debit card, LIHEAP energy assistance, and in-store credit—basically people walking in and asking for credit on an informal basis.

Due to shipping schedules, at the time of the June report many isolated villages had not yet purchased fuel at true winter prices, making the information collected in June a bit of an underestimate. Retailers consistently say there is no change to the volume of fuel they are using; people are already using minimum without sacrificing their health and safety. Dr. Grewe wondered if that

response will change as prices continue to rise across the winter.

