

January 23, 2020

North Slope Borough residents –

The end of 2019 marked five years since the formation of Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat (VOICE), a nonprofit organization established to give Arctic residents a seat at the table when making decisions affecting them and their communities. Enacting positive change requires bringing people together, and last year VOICE reaffirmed its commitment to strengthening unity amongst North Slope entities and speaking in solidarity on issues important to our region.

Part of what makes this organization unique is its diverse membership – Tribal councils, Native regional and village corporations, regional nonprofits and for-profits, health care and educational institutions, and others such as the North Slope Borough. In 2019, VOICE was proud to welcome the City of Kaktovik and the North Slope Borough School District Board of Education as members, further expanding its representation.

Since its formation, Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat has listened to the challenges and aspirations brought forth by its member communities and pursued dozens of efforts to address and pursue them. 2019 was a busy year, and we'd like to highlight for you a handful of the important issues we engaged in and that we will continue to work towards in 2020.

TOWN HALL MEETINGS

As an organization committed to bringing the region together and advocating in the best interests of its people, VOICE pledged to hold Town Hall meetings in each of the eight North Slope communities to listen to concerns and priority issues. Last year, in addition to routine travel to villages across the Slope, we held meetings in Wainwright, Atkasuk, Anaktuvuk Pass and Point Lay. Town Hall meetings in the remaining communities are planned for 2020, starting with Point Hope this month.

A crucial component of the Town Hall's is VOICE's annual survey, which asks residents how they feel about critical issues such as subsistence, education, cultural sustainability, employment and the economy – both across the region and within their respective villages. In 2019, a separate Youth survey was also introduced in order to include the views and feedback from our young people. Results compiled from the surveys help our members identify the unique challenges facing the region so we can be effective in our education and advocacy efforts.

The Town Hall meetings, as well as the surveys, also served as the catalyst for VOICE's recent publishing of a comprehensive Resource Book – a guide to North Slope-specific materials and resources on topics ranging from climate change and housing to Arctic policy, research and more.

RISE UP INITIATIVE

Some of the priority issues identified through VOICE's community outreach include the need to address social struggles facing our villages, among them alcohol and substance misuse. Borne out of this need is the Rise Up campaign, which is scheduled to debut in first quarter 2020. Rise Up is a Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat initiative to improve the mental and physical well-being of North Slope residents and their families. By raising awareness, changing perceptions and providing the resources necessary to encourage people to seek and receive help, it aims to make a positive difference in people's lives across the Arctic.

Rise Up consists of a compelling video and corresponding engagement initiative focused on addiction. The video will be featured throughout the North Slope Borough on television and social media outlets, provided to clinics and health organizations, presented at Town Hall meetings across the region and made available on the VOICE website and other outlets.

VOICE has also established a Rise Up Ambassador program with the goal of carrying the message to each of our villages and providing support. We have begun identifying village-specific representatives who will assist with presenting the video in schools, at community meetings, to service providers and other entities throughout the region, and will serve as the point of contact for anyone seeking help with alcohol and substance misuse.

AIR CARRIERS WORKSHOP

Predictable air passenger and timely freight and mail delivery service to North Slope communities has been a critical and persistent challenge for many years. Balancing the travel needs of airline passengers against the necessity for vital mail and cargo delivery with limited resources is difficult, and it often results in significant delays for both.

In October, Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat, the State of Alaska Department of Transportation (DOT) and the Alaska Air Carriers Association held a workshop

convening air carriers with the goal of developing a unified plan to promote improvements. The workshop involved facilitated discussions around the components of air transportation, freight and bypass mail and also included representatives from the United States Postal Service (USPS).

VOICE will continue to work with all stakeholders to formulate solutions that improve services, beginning with the USPS in January followed by another inclusive Air Carriers Workshop later this year.

WALRUS IVORY ROUNDTABLE

As many of you know, federal elephant ivory bans put in place back in 2016 have significantly impacted Alaska Native artists and their ability to sell handiwork from legally obtained walrus, mammoth and mastodon ivory. Since that well-intentioned federal legislation – enacted to save endangered African elephants – six U.S. states have enacted broad bans on all commercial ivory because it's easier and less expensive to enforce an outright ban than to determine the ivory's origin.

In 2019, as part of its ongoing effort to inform lawmakers about the regulation's unintended consequences and reinforce the rights of Alaska Natives under the Marine Mammals Protection Act, VOICE participated in a roundtable discussion in Washington D.C. The Walrus Ivory Roundtable was attended by U.S. Senator Dan Sullivan, congressional staff and other government representatives, as well as e-commerce giants eBay, Facebook, Oracle and T-Mobile, who hoped to gain an understanding of the political obstacles and learn how e-commerce might help bring customers directly to the artists.

At the state level, VOICE has prepared an informational campaign scheduled for Spring 2020 to help provide clarity on legal ivory sales to outsiders visiting Alaska. It will also be meeting with key tourism organizations in an effort to educate customers on the difference between elephant and walrus ivory as we work to protect the market for Alaska Native ivory artwork.

NPR-A IMPACT FUND WORKING GROUP

Last year, VOICE continued its work on the State of Alaska-administered NPR-A Impact Mitigation Grant Program – a grant available to National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska municipalities that is funded from the sale of leases and royalty payments in the NPR-A. VOICE created a working group to develop recommendations on how the application and administration process of the grant can be improved and simplified. The group, comprised of members from NPR-A villages, also worked to educate communities on how to successfully receive funding through the program. Through the working group, VOICE will bring our recommendations for improvement back to State of Alaska grant administrators.

In the face of uncertainty over State of Alaska budget decisions, VOICE also advocated to protect the grant program to keep the money available to eligible communities.

OUR VOICE. OUR VISION.

Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat works collectively toward improving the lives of community members through engagement in local, state, national and international arenas and operates off the core belief that local people should have the greatest say in issues that affect the Arctic.

Last year, our membership worked with the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission to address federal issues affecting subsistence hunters and to improve co-management; created a working group on the Arctic Coast Port Access Route Study to ensure agencies held public meetings in coastal communities; assisted the Native Village of Kaktovik to effectively participate in the ANWR NEPA process to amplify local voices; identified needs and provided tools for regional challenges such as housing shortages, wildlife management, indoor air quality, climate change adaptation, and much more.

As stewards of our land, water and resources for thousands of years, the Arctic people should be fully integrated into any decisions which affect our region, our culture and the economic stability of our communities. By bringing together a diverse group of organizations that share common responsibilities and a unified purpose, we have the opportunity to realize the bright future we envision for the North Slope. We have the strength and ability to be involved, speak as one and make a difference in the lives of our people for generations to come.

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Sayers Tuzroyluk
President, Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat