



Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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The Eskimos sometimes arrive at the Seattle Orientation Center, a motel unit near the University of Washington, Seattle, in heavy parkas, wool clothing, and mukluks.

They come to Seattle as the first lap in a journey toward a better life. Each applied to the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Alaska to move to a large city where employment and training opportunities, are better than they are at home.

In the opinion of BIA's Employment Assistance Branch in Alaska, the Alaska Native, whether Eskimo, Indian or Aleut, needs orientation to urban life in the "Lower 48" before he can be successfully trained or employed. This is the task of the Bureau's "halfway house" the Seattle Orientation Center.

When the Eskimo was accepted in the program he may have been picked up by a bush-pilot in a four-place plane which landed on the over with pontoons in summer or skis in winter. He was then flown the largest nearby town where he took a commercial plane, probably to Anchorage or Fairbanks. There he boarded a jet and in a matter of hours was in Seattle.

When he arrived at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport the Eskimo was met by a BIA employee and taken to the Seattle Orientation Center, which takes up two-thirds of a wing of the Coach House Motel, at 4801 24th Avenue, N.E.

Airplanes, radios, and boats are familiar to him. Cars and buses are strange. Asked if he had ever been in a city, one Eskimo replied; "Yes, I've been to Bethel." Bethel is a town in Alaska of about 1,500 population.

At home he may have known and spoken to everyone. In Seattle he may know no one. No one speaks nor smiles. If a person did not speak nor smiles at home, that meant he was angry.

If the Eskimo is alone in Seattle he will be housed with several other single men. If he comes with his family, they will be housed together. Each living unit has a couch, kitchen, coffee table, several beds. Cribs and cots are available.

The Eskimo initially is taken on a tour of the city, instructed in map reading, and urged to telephone the bus company for instructions to what bus to take if this becomes necessary. The University Village Shopping Center near the motel becomes a "school." Its two large supermarkets, bank, post office, dime store, hardware store, and drugstore are used by the Eskimos and their counselors as "textbooks."

The Center inventories clothing needs of the Eskimo, Indian, or Aleut and tries to see that he is properly equipped with the necessities as far as funds permit. The shopping is done in stores that emphasize high quality and low cost. Budgeting does not always come naturally to the Eskimo, raised perhaps on the tradition that the man who kills the largest animal and shares it with his family and neighbors is the man to be admired.

A group counseling session in which the Eskimo is encouraged to air his difficulties takes place each day at 9:30 a.m. In the afternoon, the Eskimo is taken through various commercial and industrial operations to give him an idea of what is involved in various kinds of work. Although the Alaskan has made his decision as to the city to which he will go and the occupation he will enter either directly or through training - he sometimes needs additional vocational advice.

The Eskimos are also taken to a session of the Seattle municipal court where they are impressed with the difference between law in a city and that in Alaska. The judge often addresses them personally.

The Eskimo, Indian, or Aleut ordinarily stays at the Center at least two weeks, although he may remain as long as the staff of the Center believes orientation is necessary.

He leaves for other Employment Assistance Offices of the Bureau of Indian Affairs including those in Chicago, Dallas-Ft. Worth, Denver, Los Angeles, Alameda, San Jose, Washington, D.C., and the Madera, Calif., and Roswell, N.M. Training Centers. The Madera and Roswell Training Centers specialize in whole family training of the disadvantaged. At these centers the Alaska Native receives training in a vocation leading to employment in the Lower 48 or in Alaska if that is his plan.

The Eskimos are taken to the bus depot by Seattle Orientation Center personnel to leave for their training or employment destination. Each has a folder that gives in detail information about the city for which they are bound and how to get to their hotel. They are given cab fare. If they arrive before 4:00 p.m., they call the Bureau of Indian Affairs Employment Assistance Office in their destination city. If not, they telephone next day.

Since the Seattle Orientation Center started operations in July, 1963, 1,264 Eskimos, Indians, and Aleuts have been served. Approximately 8 percent of that number were returned to Alaska either because they changed their minds about relocation or because of emotional or physical difficulties which made actual relocation impossible.
