

Lisa defends dental health aide therapists

Arctic Sounder staff

Sen. Lisa Murkowski spoke out in support of Alaska's Dental Health Aide Therapist program Wednesday before the Indian Affairs Committee hearing on the reauthorization of the Indian Health Care Improvement Act. The program, which is in use in Kotzebue and the surrounding villages as well as in Bethel, makes use of trained dental therapists in areas where full-time dentists are either in short supply or totally absent.

"We have a dentist shortage and a dental health crisis

throughout rural Alaska," said Sen. Murkowski. "When we can't get the professionals into the villages, we need to be creative and do what we can to solve this problem."

The American Dental Association opposes the use of dental health aide therapists and maintains that the trained therapist aides are not capable of providing adequate care. During Wednesday's hearing, ADA president-elect Dr. Robert Branjord described the program as an "unfair experiment on Native Alaskans," and as "second-class service."

Dr. Mary Willard, a dentist

with the Yukon Kuskokwim Health Corp. Dental Clinic, testified to the success of the therapist program in providing care to rural Alaska.

"I believe what we are doing is a good thing and I know the people in the area are very supportive of us," Willard said.

Willard, who oversees the program in Bethel, noted that the therapists are as equally trained and skilled as the dental school students who have come to work in the area. Willard also registered her opposition

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to the ADA campaign against the program.

"I learned this morning that the ADA, in our local newspapers, is describing the dental therapists as experimenting on people of the vil-

lages and providing substandard care," Willard said. "I very strongly and clearly state that that is not true."

Murkowski noted that there is a severe shortage of trained dentists in rural Alaska and an equally large problem of attracting dentists to rural areas across the state.

"Rather than see if the ther-

apist program can truly have the positive impact on rural Alaska that we believe it is having, the ADA would have us solve our dental backlog with the sole use of dentist volunteers," Murkowski said. "While the work of any volunteer is appreciated, it is hard for them to give more than two weeks a year and that's part of our biggest problem. Without the full-time presence of health education and health service, something these trained dental therapists can provide, we will not make progress in addressing rural Alaska's severe dental needs. I strongly support this program and the benefit it can provide to Alaskans."