

Yupik Women's Coalition



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March 16, 2012

Dear Senator Murkowski,

I am writing to thank you for your good words in support of our Alaska Native women. As a Senator you have supported those of us in rural off road villages to provide services to women in our Yup'ik Villages and other Alaska Native Villages. I write because I believe that the tribal provisions in the Stand Against Violence and Empower Native Women Act that are also included now in the VAWA Reauthorization Act are needed to help our Villages protect women.

I am now a grandmother of five; three boys and two girls. I am also an elected member of our tribal council here in the Alaska Native Village of Emmonak. I write to share with you some stories from our Villages that may help you to understand how in our everyday lives the tribal amendments will increase the safety of Native women.

Growing up in the Village of Emmonak we spoke Yu'pik, lived off the land by subsistence activities of fishing and hunting, and most importantly our families tried to teach us to respect everyone. I graduated from high school in 1977, helped our Village establish safe homes in 1979, and the Emmonak Women's Shelter in 1983. Looking back over the last 33 years I realize I have spent much of my life focused on this issue. Like so many other women now involved in the shelter and our mothers before us we really have no choice. Domestic violence, rape, suicide, and now the sex trafficking of our women is threatening the future of our Village.

Sadly one of the greatest challenges to our Village is providing services to women seeking help from abusers. As a Village and Council we work hard to address domestic and sexual violence. Our tribal government strongly supports the Emmonak Women's Shelter. It was opened in 1983 without any support from outside the Village. The Village government provided the building to house the Shelter and community members donated everything needed to open the shelter. The Village government and the Shelter coordinate and sponsor community education and awareness events such as the Peace Walk and broadcasting of Public Service Announcements on both the regional radio station and the Village station.

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Our Shelter is designed and decorated to look and feel like a Yup'ik home. The Shelter includes three bedrooms, a children's playroom filled with toys and books, and a common kitchen and living room area. The Shelter operates primarily on volunteers from the Village. Yup'ik women from as far away as Anchorage call the Shelter because they want to talk to someone who understands their language, culture and community. Women are often flown in from other remote villages to receive services here because we are a Native based shelter. Our Shelter is one of a kind. It is the only shelter in Alaska that is completely Native-operated, managed and located in an off-road remote Village. Our services are in high demand because the staff is all Yup'ik-speaking women who are active in our community. Women receive assistance in their own language and the shelter provides all services from a Yup'ik context. We are proud of the long history of our shelter serving women from Emmonak and also being able to help our other Native sisters in need of help from other regions of Alaska.

Now I must share with you some examples of why the need for the tribal VAWA amendments is so great for us living here in the Yukon Delta region. I hope these examples provide you with an even greater understanding of how VAWA makes a difference in the everyday life of Yup'ik women living in off-road communities. These stories I want to share with you are horrible but sadly such cases happen every day to countless women in our region. These stories are the reason why we need VAWA and very importantly we need the tribal sections of VAWA.

The first story happened in the Village of Nunam Iqua. The Village called for assistance and in the four hours it took for the state trooper to arrive from Bethel the man beat his wife with a 12-gauge shotgun and then tried to fire it at her, fortunately it did not go off. She fled the house, grabbing her 1-year old child in her arms. Running she saw her husband hit a friend in the head with the butt of the gun. The abuser then barricaded himself in the house with four children. He grabbed his 1-month old son out of the arms of a 13-year-old girl and threw him to the floor. As she grabbed for the baby he punched, choked, and then raped her. Her 5-year old brother and 7-year old cousin watched. These few details tell only part of the horror experienced that day by his multiple victims that will remain with them, their families and the entire Village. This Village has no law enforcement or Village Public Safety Officers.

In another Yup'ik Village an elderly woman who was in her late 60's, married to her husband for 40 years lived in an abusive relationship. There was nowhere to go. The village where she lived had no shelter or safe house. People just lived with what they had to survive, which meant she lived with his abuse. For many years this woman lived with the physical abuse, mental abuse, verbal abuse, isolation, and under his every day control. It got to a point where her husband would wake her up in the middle of the night when he wanted food by spilling a 5 gallon bucket of ice cold water on her while she lay sleeping on the bed. The husband died but

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unfortunately the abuse continued by her son. This woman learning of the Emmonak Women's Shelter left the abusive son saying, "I do not have to stay here and be abused".

There are many untold stories of Yup'ik women living in fear behind closed doors, many still need safe places to go when there is violence. Rural remote villages struggle for safety everyday. We thank you Senator Murkowski for your on-going support. We thank you for understanding our needs in Alaska regarding safety for Native women. We ask you to continue to be our champion in supporting VAWA and the tribal sections of VAWA.

Respectfully,

Lenora Hootch, Executive Director
Yupik Women's Coalition