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Association of Village Council Presidents (AVCP) Typhoon Merbok Recommendations

October 17, 2022

Testimony of Vivian Korthuis:

The following are lessons learned during Typhoon Merbok. These observations and recommendations are with the hope that we will be better prepared for the next big storm in the Bering Sea that hits our villages. I will speak to 6 different categories of concerns.

Number One: Forecasting and Immediate Response is necessary to get a sense of what can happen ahead of time and exactly what is happening in real time.

a. **Life Safety.** Without the presence of Public Safety in all of our communities, the Life Safety of residents falls to the Tribal Leaders, Search & Rescue Volunteer Teams or Elders in the village. This role is critical to the community's sense of safety in crisis. Ultimately, a community emergency plan without the resources and infrastructure on the ground remains useless. We were very lucky during Typhoon Merbok that there were no lives lost in our villages.

b. **Immediate Community Assessments.** AVCP staff did an immediate assessment of all village-based staff and AVCP leased spaces. AVCP also setup a Point of Contact (POC) for Tribes and Tribal Members to call in and report new and ongoing issues. AVCP's POC coordinated daily with the National Guard and State of Alaska. AVCP also conducted other assessments to assist with emergency federal funding. It is clear that without good regional coordination it was hard to coordinate all the necessary assessment activities.

The State of Alaska National Guard completed 17 community assessments in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta. Those assessments included looking at any damage to community infrastructure including the clinics, schools, etc. and assessing communications including phone, internet, etc. The assessment by the National Guard provided a wider or regional sense of the impact of Typhoon Merbok at the community level. Altogether this highlighted the need for a "regional" sense of impact of the disaster. The regional picture is critical so that the scope of the disaster can be determined. AVCP recommends that the Western Alaska Emergency Response Center be built in the Region to assist Tribes in the event of an emergency.

Number Two: Individual, Community and Regional Emergency Preparedness is essential in anticipation of the next big storm which we know will come sooner than later. In every village, it is essential to address Emergency Preparedness. Lessons learned from Typhoon Merbok brought forward items that need to be implemented in every village immediately.

a. **Emergency Clean Water.** Every community relies on clean water to drink. When our villages got flooded, the system in place for producing clean water was compromised or failed. When the salt water from the ocean penetrates the drinking water system, then the health of the whole community is at risk. Every village needs a Salt Water Purification System.

b. **Emergency Communications.** During and after the storm event, communications were critical. When the land line telephone, cell phone, internet, VHF radio and electricity all fails, it impacts communication within the village or with outside resources. The village will suffer alone without emergency communications, especially during emergencies at night or during the winter when daylight is limited. If our villages had appropriate Public Safety, an emergency communication system could be put in place under their leadership. Every village needs an emergency communications system.

c. **Emergency Equipment and Space to Work.** When an emergency happens, it is critical to have the appropriate equipment ahead of time already in the village. Our communities do not have the EMT or Fire Services or equipment at the local level. So, it makes sense to at least have some kind of emergency equipment village package. This includes a generator, communications equipment, life safety equipment, boats, snowmachines, ATV's, building material, hammers and nails as examples of what these emergency equipment packages need already in the village. In the context of a small community in Rural Alaska, there is also a need to identify the space to do repairs in the appropriate setting. In the winter, this is more of a challenge because of the cold temperatures to conduct work outside.

d. **Training.** A whole emergency response system is needed with all component parts intact for EVERY village. It would also be necessary to have all the appropriate training in place to operate the emergency equipment, communications, and infrastructure needs. In villages that don't have health aides or clinics, the SAR could be trained as EMTs.

e. **Village Airports.** During the storm, we were lucky that there was no one critically injured or hurt that required an emergency medical evacuation. Just imagine if we had an average size village with 600 plus residents that needed to be evacuated all at once. And if this happened during the winter, we would also have to worry still about the ocean not freezing. There is no more shore ice to keep the storms offshore. So, that means our airports become critical infrastructure during an emergency along the Bering Sea Coast. Our communities do not have roads that lead outside our villages. We are not on the road system. The airports need to meet the minimum requirements to receive aircraft that is big enough to assist in the evacuation or provide assistance to the community in the time of need.

Number Three: Local Infrastructure and Individual Property. The damage in the villages included houses off their foundations; roofs torn off; porches destroyed; fuel tanks damaged; windows broken; vehicles, ATVs, and boats damaged; sewage and electrical lines damaged; board walks and roads compromised; and debris everywhere. The communities' spirit and strength to address the loss and start to repair any damages are tested to the limit. To rebuild a community is not an easy task. All the infrastructure that is damaged or lost will need appropriate resources to rebuild. Every household that was damaged will also need the appropriate resources to rebuild. This includes all structures and equipment we use to maintain our subsistence Way of Life.

a. Grave/Burial Sites. *The high winds and water damaged grave and burial sites in low-lying areas along the Bering Sea Coast. We have some villages where the caskets are placed on top of the ground due to permafrost or water in the ground. These caskets are anchored to the ground. During the storm, there were some grave sites in which the water displaced caskets into the community. There may be some grave sites where this is yet to be assessed.*

Number Four: Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management. *For Alaska, the Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management's location is based in Anchorage, with access to fill out an application for disaster assistance online at ready.alaska.gov. I recommend that the DHSM be more accessible and present in Rural Alaska, especially because our villages have internet challenges. I recommend that DHSM formally partner with Tribes and Tribal organizations to better coordinate preparedness and response to disasters in the future. One of the tangible issues that needs to be addressed is the assistance to rural residents and Tribal members in filling out paperwork when the internet is limited or non-existent in villages and the need to assist people face-to-face under stressful emergency circumstances in their own Native language. AVCP's staff organized a training by the State and will be available in 30 villages around the region to assist Tribal Members in filling out both the individual State and FEMA applications that are necessary to get reimbursed for damages from the disaster relief funding. This is the type of partnership that could be developed for better operations in the future.*

Number Five: Search and Rescue. *Typhoon Merbok highlighted the need for Public Safety in every one of our villages. It also highlighted the need for Search and Rescue services not only at the village but the regional levels. All the SAR teams in our villages are volunteers. In a disaster, when there is a need for SAR, the volunteers worry about not only their own families but their whole community. If the SAR does not have the tools or communication equipment needed then they are operating at a disadvantage. The Local SARs have the local knowledge not only to plan but also to assist either State or Federal Emergency Management response to the situation at hand in real-time. Every village has a right hand and a left hand – Public Safety and the Clinics, both are needed to help the whole community. We cannot operate with one hand tied behind our backs in any emergency.*

Number Six: AVCP's work assisting Tribes in our region. *AVCP has been working closely with the State of Alaska, FEMA, Red Cross, Alaska National Guard, and Emergency Tribal Contacts within the 48 communities that AVCP serves. Our first priority was assuring hard-hit communities had arrangements to receive essential services such as shelter, food, water, and hygiene supplies. Many of which were generously donated by outside organizations, all of which wouldn't be possible without freight donations from airlines in our surrounding area to transport donated items to those rural communities.*

Thank you.

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For additional information, please contact AVCP Communications Director, Gage Hoffman at 907-543-7308 or email at ghoffman@avcp.org

AVCP is a regional nonprofit tribal consortium comprised of the 56 federally recognized tribes of the YK Delta. The geographic boundaries of AVCP extend from the Yukon River Village of Russian Mission downstream to the Bering Sea coast, north up through Kotlik and south along the coastline to Platinum and then extending up the Kuskokwim River to Stony River, including Lime Village on the Stony River tributary. The area encompasses approximately 6.5 million acres, or 55,000 square miles, in Western Alaska