

# Village Public Safety: *Now and Into the Future*

---



---

DECEMBER 29, 2023

---

Village Public Safety Officer program  
Authored by: Joel Hard, Director



---

# Introduction

The Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) program is critical to rural public safety and the Department of Public Safety's (DPS) success in meeting its core responsibility. The program is a meaningful commitment to provide safer, more just communities, and after more than 40 years there is much to proudly look back upon. Over 1200 men and women of dedication, honor and pride who stepped up to serve an innovative role of law enforcement, fire prevention, search and rescue and emergency medical responder. Simultaneously, serving as representatives of the Department and employees of regional Native organizations (Program grantees or grantees), meeting a shared mission in partner villages.

But the VPSO program didn't always receive the attention it should or was appreciated for its important purpose – presence is protection. As fewer communities were served by a languishing program, rural Alaskans became desperate for DPS to make a credible and tangible recommitment to rural public safety. This report defines that recommitment.



Director Joel Hard  
Village Public Safety program  
Department of Public Safety

***Mission Statement: Achieve safe rural villages by consistent and continued Village Public Safety Officer presence and example to prevent serious accident or crime before they happen.***



---

# Village Public Safety Officer Program Improvements

From 2022 to 2024, the Department, the program grantees and villages served by these regional programs have worked cooperatively to revive and improve the statewide program, providing greater flexibility to serve communities left unserved or underserved. Importantly, the Legislature passed Senate Bill (SB) 81 to provide needed statutory change on matters of eligibility and training, but it also responded to other department proposals to provide important intent for new direction. An improved program has emerged.

1. Regulation and policy revisions to align with SB81 statutory changes are final.
  - There is now clarity in law that grant funds can be more flexibly used to support VPSOs to include housing and other new purposes now implemented in the grants.
  - More than one officer can be more readily assigned to a village, and to support assignments in communities where other law enforcement may already exist. Important officer safety and work life balance will be better achieved, directly addressing recruitment and retention.
  - Traveling or roving VPSOs are now formally recognized and allowed to serve villages that lack infrastructure to support permanent positions. This allows us to cast the program more broadly while infrastructure is improved in villages over time.
2. VPSO wages have improved. A VPSO salary study completed in FY21 showed VPSO salaries had fallen behind the average compensation rates to other rural public safety salaries. In FY22, DPS adopted a 3-year incremental \$7.00/hour salary increase which the legislature accelerated in FY23 with additional funding. The entry level VPSO salary today is now \$34.79/hour, a near 30% increase from 2018, and competitive with other like positions. These efforts

---

help Program grantees become competitive employers in rural Alaska, improving recruitment and retention.

3. With \$2.9 million in Capital Improvement Project (CIP) funding, we have begun to make investments in needed facilities and equipment. This CIP funding is allocated directly to the grantees to expend on the priorities needed in these programs. These housing, office and equipment projects directly address deficits that have been significant drivers for VPSOs to leave communities and the program.

Perhaps most unique, VPSOs serve as bridges between indigenous communities and the larger department, helping each to better understand and know the other, minimizing tensions from police services, improving relationships, and developing needed trust and respect.

4. DPS hired its first VPSO Program Tribal Liaison position. This position will teach and help others effectively and routinely consult on public safety matters, maintaining government to government relationships respectful of all parties. This position will continue to elevate the VPSO program as the innovation of tribal collaboration it was designed to be. It will help educate new employees that villages have specific cultural and tribal knowledge that must inform Department policies to create better outcomes for them.
5. We reformed basic training to meet the basic certification standards of VPSOs consistent with the requirements established in law. VPSOs had been pigeon-holed into generalized training of over 17 weeks. Unique primary training was developed prioritizing a culturally aware public safety and law enforcement presence to foster safer communities less vulnerable to accident or violence.
  - A new academy (two trainings each year) of 9-week duration inclusive of all training required for VPSO certification (except fire training) was developed, trimming by nearly 50% the previous training. By eliminating unused training – traffic enforcement, radar, emergency vehicle operations, and other training unnecessary to village performance - time away from their villages has been substantially reduced.



- 
- Fire training will be delivered multiple times in remote training venues to support the building of necessary connections and relationships with partner institutions and Fire departments. Building advanced subject training and VPSO annual trainings and recertifications into rural training venues in Bethel, Kotzebue and Fairbanks will round out broadly delivered and advanced training opportunities and help build the training capacities of these venues into the future.
  - We preserved the integrity of the program’s academic and fitness relationship to the department because it is a unique department certification. The Sitka academy has a well-established history training over 1,200 VPSOs over in the last 40+ years. VPSOs are closely connected to AST operationally and training together gives them enormous advantage.

We have stimulated and helped develop grantee organizational strategies that provide previously missing structural layers of support and supervision that will be necessary for growing regional programs. Giving the grantees as much flexibility to develop sustainable programs is the best way to accommodate the operational, geographic, and cultural diversity of regions.

To create stronger regional programs that recognize the knowledge and experience of management/leadership positions in uniform, grantees are allowed to select and appoint a certified VPSO to perform regional coordinator (or other directly related supervisory position) duties. We also worked with rural legislators to introduce intent language to allow even greater flexibility by adding a layer of uniformed supervision necessary to support healthy regional programs by repurposing the dormant Regional Public Safety Officer position.

*“It is the intent of the Legislature that the Department of Public Safety continue to support improvements to the VPSO program that include supporting VPSO Program Grantee organizational structures that require, or will require as programs grow, layers of needed support, supervision, and on-going training. The Legislature encourages the Department to consider the Regional Public Safety Officer (RPSO) positions (AS18.65.680) no longer used by the Department for State*

---

*employment and repurpose the position to fulfill VPSO regional and supervisory roles needed for larger programs, and appropriate to fund using VPSO program grants.”*

We have accelerated hiring by using private industry to help us with improved advertising, messaging, and outreach. The ‘Heart of a VPSO’ campaign reached audiences across the state in rural and urban markets. The campaign resulted in a 53% increase in VPSO applicants from FY21 to FY22, and a remarkable increase in traffic to the recruitment website, [vps0.alaska.gov](http://vps0.alaska.gov) from about 6,200 visits in FY21 to over 16,000 visits in FY22, a 158% increase. Importantly, retention has also improved from an average of 3.2 years to 5 years.

A new permanent director with a division structure under the Commissioner will give the program parity, strengthening its place in the department. Protecting this critical feature of the Department, even as administrations and priorities change, has been one of the most important changes made possible with administration and Legislative support. This assures the voice promised to tribal interests is not trivialized in a department weighted by other priorities that enjoy a division construct.

No policing organization can deliver on its fundamental public safety promise to communities without strong, sincere relationships built on mutual trust and respect. These are too easily eluded by isolation, insensitivity, or the inflexibility of a centralized law enforcement bureaucracy. Throughout this work, we have emphasized that this innovative program was well ahead of its time. It envisioned relationships and collaboration between tribes/villages, Native organizations, and the department at a time those weren’t publicly recognized as the priority they are today. Over time some of that was misplaced, but these relationships and collaborations are the programs true strengths and we needed to get back to them. We have recommitted to program relationships and the trust of our grantees has been restored.

We have also begun to restore department appreciation for the program and its unique history and purpose. This has been Alaska’s Defund Police discussion. It motivated DPS to improve how we interacted with village interests on matters of public safety. Consulting meaningfully on these issues and the suite of solutions needed for rural Alaska has

---

resulted in more flexible and effective public policy, and more funding directed to rural public safety efforts.

## **Understanding and Coordination of Federal Justice Related Funding**

As we work hard to continue to improve and expand the VPSO program, we must recognize state funding will never be able to serve all communities in a landscape so immense and challenging by geographic expanse, isolation, and weather. Federal funding, training and infrastructure are necessary to support more rural villages in this enormous geographic and cultural landscape. The question is, how can we improve coordination with federal agencies that bear a trust responsibility for public safety as well?

In Alaska state and tribal jurisdiction are concurrent. Federal entities supporting tribal justice programs favorably leverage public safety efforts with increased capacity. But those services have never been strategically coordinated with DPS. For too long, we all have been independently building solutions to the same problem. These disconnected approaches are not always helpful to shared goals – safer communities. In the absence of Federal operational support positions in rural Alaska, village and tribal police (VPO/TPO) rely heavily upon DPS for guidance and support. But such connection is not well planned when these federal efforts are proposed, funded and built. The services VPO and TPOs provide to villages can be improved with better coordination.

The combination of State/Federal/Tribal public safety is the only way to achieve the effective presence needed in all villages to meaningfully make them safer places to live - from accident and crime. Ultimately, villages are better served when DPS supports compatible tribal authorities and justice related objectives made possible with federal funding and there are no legal impediments to doing so. As a department, we must develop more comfort with this. Understanding this landscape of resources and coordinating it in more structured ways will require on-going discussions with the tribes and the federal government. Such a coordinated approach will assure that we consistently build capacity in the same direction, towards the same objectives, not disconnected from one another.

---

## State Trooper Interactions and Support

None of what I have stated above works without robust, healthy, and interactive relationships between Trooper and VPSO and the regions that employ them. We need to better communicate the purposes and complexities of the program to avoid misunderstanding and conflicts going forward. We need to embrace the program for its purpose – a trifecta approach to public safety involving the Department, Native organizations, and villages – and welcome that critical tribal input, support, and capacity. Suggestions from the past that this does not work, or that funding could be more efficiently applied through VPSOs as state employees reflects ignorance of the program purpose and the consequence of such a change.

- Village are generally viewed as having greater understanding of the special problems, values, and issues in the village, as well as more sensitivity to resident concerns.
- Policing services from State Troopers are necessary and welcome by villages, but also are viewed as being insufficient in both degree and magnitude to meet village needs.
- Cooperative efforts to deal with crime and other community problems in villages, not a DPS developed and imposed enforcement plan, informed the creation of the VPSO Program. A proactive presence-based approach, versus a reactive response-based approach to public safety and law enforcement.
- Lingering notions to create state employees to save costs and eliminate Native organization involvement diminish the voice promised to these Native organizations and villages and eliminates their strong and necessary contributions in input and administrative support. It would likely cause DPS to suffer just more like-work-like-pay grievances, potentially eliminating the uniquely developed VPSO position, certain to worsen our performance in and for rural villages.
- Collaborating to deliver public safety service to Native villages and rural communities is something we need to better understand as a department, and routinely communicate internally. Mastering our collaborative approach to realize



---

the most effective relationships and program in matters of public safety is a never-ending priority.

## Conclusion

We have demonstrated once again, as the Department had for decades, these partnerships do work, but they require focused attention and commitment. The program is in a better place. In 2021, as VPSO program hearings began in the Legislature, less than 40 VPSOs were employed. Today, 70 are employed. We expect by the end of FY24 the regional programs will employ at or near 80 VPSOs. That is within 15 positions of the peak employment of 94 in 2013. A significant demonstration of what is possible by working closely together.

Most Program grantees are responding well and growing. But there is much more to be done. Success will take devoted attention to continued incremental progress, as well as sustained financial support from the administration and legislature. Future reforms may be needed, and every day, the decisions we make must be informed by one enduring question – are villages safer by what we do? If they are not, the Department must endeavor to use a wider complement of ideas and resources involving Program grantees and village partners.

Making people safe. There is no government purpose more important and Troopers and VPSOs bear that responsibility in villages together, albeit somewhat differently. It must always be a shared ideal, though it will never be easy or simplistic. With the safety and security they can best provide when working together, people will be better served. That is our fundamental responsibility and recommitment.



ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY  
VILLAGE PUBLIC SAFETY OFFICER PROGRAM

Director's Compass  
**Presence is Protection**

**MISSION**

*"Achieve safe rural villages by consistent Village Public Safety Officer presence and example to prevent serious accident or crime before they happen."*

Our CORE mission is the immediate and sustained protection of people in rural communities.

**VISION**

***Reliable Village Presence and Respected Officer Comportment***

Achieve public safety and build support for our mission through consistent collaborative public service attentive to State, local and tribal laws, and customs of the region.

**GOALS**

1. Our rural public safety efforts reflect each program's important perspective and highest priorities.
2. Build support for public safety through professional community interaction and partnership.
3. Meet State and Program expectations of public safety professionals.
  - Treat individuals with compassion and fairness; respect unique cultures and characteristics of rural Alaskan communities and tribes
  - Engage with and involve our local communities to understand their concerns and priorities;
  - Respect regional partners and embrace best practices and new technologies.
4. Demonstrate effective leadership, fiscal management, and on-going learning.
5. Consult and coordinate on efficient sharing of program resources; collaborate with one another, AST, and other agencies and tribes.
6. Be consistent, but reasonable in our approach, focusing on our preeminent goal of public safety through presence and example.
7. Recruit and retain a professional work force capable of meeting the high demands and cultural awareness required to be Village Public Safety Officer.

**Safe Rural Communities**