



House Public Safety - Finance Subcommittee – Public Testimony

Tlingit & Haida VPSO Program

The Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) program trains and employs individuals residing in the village as first responders to public safety emergencies such as search and rescue, fire protection, emergency medical assistance, crime prevention and basic law enforcement. The VPSO program works closely with the local mayor and city council as well as with the Alaska State Troopers to administer this program in designated Southeast Communities. Currently, Tlingit & Haida employs VPSO's in the following communities: Kake (2), Angoon, Pelican, Saxman, Kasaan. Currently, we have vacancies in Hydaburg and Thorne Bay.

Hiring

There are a variety of issues that the VPSO program faces in regards to hiring, including: Alaska's expansive geographic area making it challenging for the state to provide adequate public safety for all its citizens, therefore the genesis of the VPSO program, but even then there are challenges of working in remote locations, sub-optimal facilities and equipment, challenges of law enforcement in communities where you grew up or have family members, pay, flexibility in deciding when to travel, historic underfunding of AST so they cannot always be where they want to be or be proactive like they'd like to be, training requirements, housing, hiring/background check process.

For example, Tlingit & Haida experienced an unfortunate background check issue resulting in the loss of a VPSO candidate. The State Trooper that was originally assigned to assist the VPSO Program in doing its background checks on applicants was reassigned. The next State Trooper assigned to do VPSO background checks went on vacation. This is not malice on the part of DPS, but an example of how things don't always go according to plan, and personnel shortage can cause a "bottle neck" that affects other programs and communities. Tlingit & Haida had an applicant, it took 4-5 months to complete the background, by the time the background check completed and approved by AST to hire, the applicant had moved on to new employment opportunities. Another issue that the VPSO program faces is retention. This is an area where we'd like to work with AST to improve conditions for VPSOs so they are more likely to stay in the position once they're hired.

Training

VPSO's go through the AST Training Academy, which is a 16-week program. Additional training is provided once the VPSO is on the job. Training funds have been removed from the VPSO budget. Previously, the state funds each contractor to provide training for their VPSOs. The training is usually administered in a one week Regional Training. A program coordinator would work with the State Troopers to set up a list of trainings that are needed by the VPSOs in their region. Tlingit & Haida VPSOs attend any other trainings that might be put on by AST or another organization that works with first responders.

Indirect

All regional organizations that administer the VPSO program have some form of indirect or operational cost to run the program. The VPSO Program has a shared cap at 30%, which is the maximum indirect that the state will pay. Those organizations with lower rates compensate for contractors with higher rates; always under the indirect cap as a group. There are active efforts to minimize indirect rates for the

program, including: offsite offices, computer network, shifting indirect burden to programming when possible

Subsidizing the VPSO Program

Many, if not all, the contractors have gone after and received grant funding to help administer the VPSO program. T&H has applied for and received numerous grants to purchase patrol vehicles, fix emergency response boats and help with fixing public safety buildings as a way to supplement the funding received through DPS.

Communities help subsidize the program as well. Most communities provide the VPSO with a public safety building, a cell phone, and some sort of housing stipend.

Removing “Unspent” Funds

The state removed lapse funding from all VPSO contractors, nearly \$300,000 from Tlingit & Haida, nearly 25% of the FY 19 budget. There are special projects (e.g., facility maintenance in communities served) that will not be addressed, as we were told by DPS that we would not be approved for funding. The OMB Director indicated there were unspent funds for FY 2019, however, this is the time of the year that coordinators submit requests for special projects to expend those remaining funds. This has led to an unfortunately situation where VPSO contractors are no longer able to attempt to access funds approved for FY19 by the legislature. It was our intent to utilize the full appropriated amount to augment our recruitment and retention efforts; sometimes that takes the form of outreach to potential new VPSPs, but other times it is as simple as using appropriate funds to increase VPSO travel between villages or updated a holding cell. These types of expenditures can increase the likelihood we retain current officers, which helps extend the life of investments made in training and hire. In any event, those options for improving recruitment and retention appear no longer on the table this year due to the proposed budget cuts.

In closing, VPSO contractors are partners with the State. We recognize there are improvements to the program that can, and must, be made. Some of that may require consideration of statutory and regulatory changes to ensure delivery of rural public safety is done in a more effective way. We hope the legislature continues to support the program as we seek ways to improve it. We have suggestions and we welcome the opportunity to work with DPS and the legislature to honor the constitutional mandate to provide public safety, even in a state where many communities currently have zero public safety presence. I think we can all agree that is unacceptable.

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