

# **Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) Program Update, April 2019**

## **VPSOs – Committed to Rural Public Safety**

Village Public Safety Officers (VPSOs) play an integral role in delivery of much-needed public safety services in Alaska. The contractors – Alaska Native regional nonprofits, a borough, and a regional tribe – are committed to providing rural public safety support to the Department of Public Safety (DPS) across Alaska's vast geographic expanse. VPSOs and DPS are committed to making our communities safer in Alaska.

The 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 Alaska State Troopers, as well as with local mayors and city councils, to administer this program in designated communities.

VPSOs are dedicated, front-line, prevention and emergency response community leaders. VPSOs are the only public safety when it can take days for Troopers to arrive in a community to respond to emergencies and reported felonies. Most criminal behaviors and emergencies are handled exclusively by VPSOs.

VPSO contractors are committed to recruitment and retention, and have identified legitimate expenditures for equipment, infrastructure, means of transportation, facility upkeep, training, and increased geographic presence by having VPSOs cover multiple communities, all of which could help serve to increase the productivity and service longevity of the VPSOs. The VPSO program has faced challenges with recruitment and retention, similar to law enforcement agencies across the nation.

Additionally, Alaska's expansive geographic area make it challenging for the state to provide adequate public safety for all its citizens. Nevertheless, VPSO services are critical to meeting Alaska's constitutional mandate to provide public safety for its citizens.

## **Observations About “Lapse” Funds**

VPSOs received clear direction about what constitutes a legitimate expenditure last year with passage of the state operating budget, which included Intent Language that clarified what the legislature believed to be legitimate expenditures in support of recruitment and retention.

*It is the intent of the legislature that the Department disburse funding meant for the VPSO Program to VPSO grant recipients. VPSO grantees are encouraged to use the funding for recruitment and retention of VPSOs, to include consideration*

*of increases to the VPSO salary schedule. However, they may also use the funds for other purposes within their mission, such as operational costs to better utilize filled positions or housing multiple VPSOs in a single community, if judged to be more beneficial to public safety.*

And,

*It is the intent of the legislature that the amount of \$500,000 be used only for travel to rural communities by VPSOs or Alaska State Troopers. It is also the intent of the legislature that the Department support VPSO contractors' efforts to provide public safety services to the maximum geographic area surrounding their duty station.*

VPSO coordinators this year – and in years past – submitted legitimate expenditure requests that, once denied, were then described as available for “lapse.” This creates the impression that the VPSO appropriation exceeds the need in rural Alaska. This discussion of “lapse” funding misses the larger point: There are many communities in Alaska with zero public safety presence whatsoever, and VPSO contractors have proposed numerous ways to expand their reach and expand their ranks.

## **FY19 VPSO Budget Cuts**

In January 2019, midway through the state fiscal year, VPSO contractors were informed that DPS would cut an average of 27.95% of their existing FY19 budget.

### **APIAI**

- \$40,311.19 reduction, 3.09% of the original budget

### **AVCP**

- \$333,097.84 reduction, 20% of the original budget

### **BBNA**

- \$323,364.26 reduction, 25.29% of the original budget

### **Tlingit & Haida**

- \$292,000 reduction, 24.3% of the original budget.

### **Chugachmiut**

- \$256,308.17 reduction, 43.7% of the original budget

### **CRNA**

- \$213,214.28 reduction, 35.37% of the original budget

### **Kawerak**

- \$414,261.03 reduction, 34.5% of the original budget.

### **KANA**

- \$211,000 reduction, 27% of the original budget.

### **Northwest Arctic Borough**

- Did not share information.

### **TCC**

- \$652,040.93 reduction, 38.29% of the original budget

## **How the FY2019 Budget Reductions Alters the Function and Outcomes of the VPSO Program**

### **Recruitment and Hiring of VPSO Officers**

In order have a VPSO program, VPSO officers are needed. In 2018, VPSO contractors and the State of Alaska collaborated to develop a VPSO strategic plan. In that plan, the VPSO Program's vision is that every community that needs and wants VPSO coverage can have that service without hindrance or worry. This priority is linked with the ability to fund all positions required. Furthermore, during the 2018 legislative session, the intent in the appropriation to the Department of Public Safety included using the funding for recruitment and retention of VPSO's, including consideration of salary increases as well as for other areas to better utilize filled positions or housing multiple VPSO's in a single community if beneficial to public safety.

With the FY2019 VPSO budget reductions, the state has left VPSO contractors with no funds to fill positions. The contractors' personnel budget reductions to cover current employment levels and elimination of the funding held by the state for new hires will cause a funding shortage for the VPSO program.

Currently, there are 16 applicants in the hiring process for VPSO positions across the state, yet contractors have no funds dedicated to hire these positions, and they are asked to be "creative" in the remaining FY19 budget to fund them.

### **APIAI**

- All positions currently filled.

### **AVCP**

- One applicant in process
- Four applicants waiting on a physical test
- Two applicants filling out eligibility forms
- Four sent in applications of interest

### **BBNA**

- One applicants in background process.

### **Tlingit & Haida**

- Two applicants in the hiring process
- One has passed the background and is ready for hire.

### **Chugachmiut**

- Four pending applicants for two vacant positions

## CRNA

- A recruit in ALET
- One pending application

## Kawerak

- Two applicants in the background process

## KANA

- Two applicants in the background process

## Northwest Arctic Borough

- Did not share information.

## TCC

- Two applicants in the background process.
- Two sent in application of interest.

## Coordinator Travel and Recruitment Costs

- In order to recruit VPSOs, the Coordinator must be able to travel to provide PT tests; arrange for and pay the cost of the physical examinations; and other expenses associated with recruiting and processing applicants.
- In contract to AST providing funding and support Troopers who experience a critical incident, the only funding available to support the VPSO (e.g. coordinator travel to location or VPSO travel to Bethel after incident, etc.) comes from lapsed funding.

## Travel for Rover Coverage

In order to meet the VPSO program's priority of every community that needs and wants VPSO coverage can have that service without hindrance or worry without being fully staffed, contractors must rely on rover travel to provide public safety. Legislative intent from the 2018 session included using \$500,000 for travel to rural communities by VPSO's or Alaska State Troopers. Furthermore, the department support VPSO contractors' efforts to provide public safety services to the maximum geographic area.

Given the housing shortage in rural communities and the recruiting difficulties facing the VPSO program, a review of the rover position should be undertaken. Basing rovers in hub communities and assigning them to a community on a non-traditional schedule may attract VPSO applicants and provide public safety on a part-time basis to communities that would not otherwise have a VPSO.

Nothing in the VPSO authorizing statute or accompanying regulations prohibit rovers as described in Section 1.8.4 of the Grant Agreement. Once a review is done, findings are considered, and changes are made, implementation should be done immediately.

Demand increases as individual VPSO coverage decreases.

- VPSO budget went from almost \$12M in 2018 to \$13M in 2019. We are looking at a \$3M decrease in FY20. This will bring us to our lowest levels of funding since 2011, when contractors did not have rover positions.
- As coverage and staffing decrease, the need for a roving VPSO to respond in emergency situations as well as provide coverage to communities who have made a special request for public safety for a specific event or time period, increases.
- Travel will be more restrictive, and it will be harder for contractors to adjust for emergencies.
- Crisis intervention is necessary to prevent burnout and trauma, ultimately addressing retention. The need increases as VPSOs take on more responsibility and the potential for burnout increases.
- One of the documented outcomes of the region-wide AVCP Public Safety Summit in August of 2018, was roving unit coverage. Through this model, neighboring communities would share partial coverage in lieu of either full-time coverage or no coverage at all. AVCP wishes to implement this model to compensate for geographic gaps in public safety coverage. This increases usage of funding while VPSO are deployed to other communities within their assigned unit. Relative to the alternative (Alaska State Trooper coverage), this model increases VPSO presence. When compared to Trooper travel, it is more cost effective and results in a decreased response time.
- During the month of January 2019, Tanana Chiefs Conference Rovers traveled to six rural communities which are without public safety.

### **Overtime Hours**

- The use of overtime hours varies greatly by community. For example, the Native Village of Emmonak experiences crime rates, in greater numbers than their large population (approximately 1,500) would suggest. One reason for this increase in crime, may be that Emmonak has recently become a “wet community” surrounded by “dry communities” and has become a hub of alcohol activity.
- Overtime increases significantly during the seasons in which permanent fund dividends are distributed.

### **Search and Rescue**

- Contractors will not be able to purchase drags or hooks to assist villages in search and rescues.

### **Training**

- All training dollars, such as DARE Officer Training, has been removed.

### **Equipment Maintenance**

- Contractors were funded for shipping equipment for new hire VPSOs or to repair or replace equipment, which was removed.

## **Lapsed funding used for essential operational expenses outside of labor hours and fringe**

Alaska Statute 13 AAC 96.040 mandates villages requesting a VPSO to provide office space, telephone with long distance service, and a holding cell [13 AAC 96.040(a)(1)(A)-(C)]. Lapse funding has been used by VPSO contractors to cover these unfunded mandates placed on the tribes. As all of rural Alaska faces housing and infrastructure challenges today, the VPSO Program is heavily impacted by its current ability to provide adequate housing, office, and other infrastructure needs. In turn, the need for proper support infrastructure hinders the recruitment of VPSO officers.

Historically, anything outside of personnel, fringe, uniforms and training, were unfunded mandate on the hosting village. ATV tires, phone lines at offices, supplies, fuel for patrols were village responsibilities to provide for their VPSO. Majority of rural villages do not have funding for unfunded mandates and in recent years, this has slowly changed, and using some personnel costs to cover some of the unfunded mandates.

Contractors have used lapsed funding to build infrastructure and better support the VPSO officers:

### **APIAI**

- During the past 3 fiscal years, APIA has not requested any special projects or equipment outside of the annual grant applications scope of work. The equipment requested in those applications, was approved but not funded.
- Returned an average of 0.81% of their funding back to the state:
  - FY16: Returned \$2,553.89, which is 0.27% of the total funding
  - FY17: Returned \$23,526.79, which is 2.16% of the total funding
  - FY18: Returned \$14.68, which is 0.0014% of the total funding.

### **AVCP**

- AVCP was denied requests for new vehicles for Chevak, Bethel, Aniak, Kwethluk, & Emmonak. Instead, we were offered and awarded 2001-2004 vehicles, formally used by ASTs for \$5,000 each + freight.
- C-TAS funds were used to purchase 4 wheelers & snowmachines.
- C-TAS funds used by BBNH to host Statewide VPSO Regional Training (facility, trainer fees, & food). AVCP covered travel, lodging & per diem.
- 2014
  - Simulation Suite = \$550 M26/x26 21ft Non-Cond x60 = \$1,374.00
  - Security camera x8 = \$15,649
  - Napaskiak Public Safety Building renovation, used in combination with AVCP RHA in-kind funding = \$20,212
  - Mountain Village Public Safety Building renovation, supplemented with HIP funds
- 2015
  - Boat (Woolridge 20XP) with tailor & motor = \$42,282.09
  - Color printer = \$2,495.00
  - Survival Bags x30 = \$1,666.00

- Honda ATV x4 = \$34,456
- 2016
  - Fire suppression tool - \$86.02

### **Chugachmiut**

- One (1) 2019 Ford Explorer patrol vehicle for Nanwalek, valued at \$30,000.
- One (1) pre-fabricated garage with apartment for Chenega, valued at \$94,895.
- One (1) pre-fabricated garage for Tatitlek, valued at \$64,686.
- Two (2) 225 hp Honda outboard motors for the Public Safety boat in Tatitlek, valued at \$37,088.
- Four (4) electronic fingerprint instruments (one each for Chenega, Nanwalek, Port Graham, & Tatitlek), valued at \$8,000.

### **TCC**

- TCC had a plan to complete maintenance on all equipment in villages, but the funding was removed from our budget.

## **VPSOs – Committed to Improving Rural Public Safety**

The VPSO contractors stand ready to engage with efforts to improve the program. We believe meaningful engagement with contractors, tribes, and the communities they serve to be an integral step in any process that may result in broad changes to the program.