

What on-going efforts is the Administration engaging in relating to the VPSO program?

The FY2020 grant agreements have been fully executed with each of the ten Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) program grantees with the total amount of available funding under the grants line of the VPSO appropriation being awarded. Additionally, each of the grantees have received fifty percent of the grant award as an advance payment. Department of Public Safety (DPS) and the Governor's Office have maintained that any and all eligible recruits would be funded. In addition to the below changes, DPS has restructured its internal management of the program by reassigning the financial administration of the program and associated staff from the Division of Alaska State Troopers to the Grants Administration section under the Commissioner's Office.

The department continues to collaborate with the VPSO program grantees on ways to improve recruitment and retention of VPSOs including development of a strategic plan. Beginning in FY2020, several significant changes were implemented to remove identified barriers and improve the hiring and retention of VPSOs:

- Comprehensive background investigations performed by DPS on prospective VPSOs took up to four months to complete and had been identified as a possible deterrent for VPSO applicants. In response, DPS now performs only the necessary state and national fingerprint-based criminal history background checks for VPSO applicants and, as their employer, grantees have the discretion to conduct their own internal background investigations.
- A return to an 8-week VPSO certification training program has significantly streamlined the hiring process and reduced the amount of paperwork for VPSO applicants. Grantees identified the 16-week Alaska Law Enforcement Training (ALET) academy was too long which deterred VPSOs from attending and/or completing it. It also removed the mandatory physical fitness requirement for the ALET academy. As their employer, grantees can determine what physical fitness standard their VPSOs should adhere to.
- A 4-week VPSO field training program was implemented. This training is conducted by Alaska State Troopers and offers on-the-job training activities designed to better prepare the VPSO to serve their communities, thereby improving retention. VPSOs receive training from the oversight Trooper in their community in addition to spending time patrolling with a Trooper.
- Beginning in FY2019 VPSO program grantees developed a strategic plan that included a marketing plan to specifically address the recruitment of VPSOs. During a meeting in October 2019 grantees reset their strategic priorities during a meeting and established a marketing message.
- In FY2019 the salary schedule was reviewed in consultation with the grantees to address recruitment and retention related issues. As a result, appropriate increases were built in to the salary schedule for FY2020. Additionally, the salary schedule was modified to give new VPSOs a pay increase upon graduation from the training program and another increase upon completion of rural fire training.

DPS continues to conduct quarterly meetings with the grantees as a mechanism of feedback and addressing any programmatic needs. The dates of the recent meetings have been as follows:

FY19 Coordinator Meeting Dates

August 7 – 10, 2018
September 26 – 28, 2018
November 6 – 8, 2018
January 15 – 17, 2019
April 23 – 25, 2019

FY20 Coordinator Meeting Dates

October 1-4, 2020
January 13-16, 2020
Tentative date of April 6-10, 2020

Finally, several VPSO grant agreement changes have occurred in FY20 to bring the program more closely back to alignment with Statute and Regulations as well as offering Grantees more authority to manage their programs to meet their unique regional needs. These changes are documented in the Village Public Safety Officer Program Grant Agreement for State Fiscal Year 2020:

- A significant change is the addition of a ‘Scope of Work’ definition that comes directly from statute, Sec 18.65.670. This is now defined as the Appointment, Training, Supervising and Retaining of persons to serve as VPSOs that provide the protection of life and property in rural areas and provide probation and parole supervision.¹
- All sections that required the Grantee to ‘seek’ permission prior to engaging in activities that are directly related to the ‘Scope of Work’ definition was removed from the grant agreement. In some cases, language was added that requires the Grantee to ‘notify’ the Department, such as when they hire a VPSO. This gives the Grantee more authority to conduct the daily activities that are related to the management of the VPSO grant.
- Another significant change to the grant agreement was the removal of the background check process by the Department which was created a 6-8 week delay between application and hiring for the VPSO applicant. Many of the Grantees have a robust background check that they could not perform until after the Department had completed their background check, which added additional delays to the hiring process. The Department continues to conduct a finger-print based criminal history check and collect all regulatorily required documentation, however this process now only takes 1-2 weeks.²
- With this grant agreement, the VPSO Program has shifted back to an 8-week VPSO Academy. This has reduced the amount of paperwork that is required from the VPSO to attend the VPSO Certification Training as well as ensure that the VPSO is not receiving courses that have no relevance for their specific job duties such as Evasive Vehicle Operations (EVO).

¹ Section B, pp. 7-12

² Section B, p. 8

- Included in the new grant agreement is the requirement that the VPSO Coordinator obtain Criminal Justice Information System (CJIS) clearance.³ The VPSO Coordinator often comes into contact with CJIS information. This also allows the Department to work closely with the VPSO Coordinator when an investigation occurs that involves a VPSO that is employed by the Grantee. The clearance is obtained through a fingerprint-based background check.
- The Department added a subsection that requires the Department to provide VPSO applicants with initial field training and mentoring consisting of a minimum of four (4) weeks. VPSOs that graduated from ALET 19-01 have either completed the Field Training or are in the process of receiving this training.⁴
- The grant agreement also changed with regard to arming a VPSO. The grantee can now permit a VPSO to carry a firearm in the performance of their duties with the requirement that the Department is given notification of each individual permitted this ability. Further, any incident where a VPSO points a firearm in the direction of a person or fires the firearm while on duty must be reported to the Department in writing.⁵
- The VPSO Roving position language was removed from the Grant Agreement. Most roving VPSOs are working out of hub communities such as Bethel and Fairbanks and responding to villages as needed. These assignments do not meet the rural community requirements of the statutory language that defines a rural community as a community with a population of less than 1,000 within an unorganized borough or a borough if the community is not connected by road to Anchorage or Fairbanks.
- With the exception of the Roving VPSO, all of these changes are in line with requests from the Grantees to allow them more authority to manage their grant awards.

³ Section B, p. 7

⁴ Section B, p. 8-9

⁵ Appendix D