



Sponsor Statement

House Bill 199 VPSO Firearms

HB 199 will explicitly establish the legislature's intent that Village Public Safety Officers (VPSOs) be allowed to carry firearms. Under the legislation, VPSOs equipped with firearms would have to meet satisfactory training standards.

The March 19th, 2013, shooting death of unarmed VPSO Thomas Madole in Manokotak left many Alaskans deeply troubled. It was also a tragic reminder of the 1986 slaying of VPSO Ronald Zimin, who was shot as he responded to a domestic violence call in South Naknek.

VPSOs work often without backup in remote locations where a call to the State Troopers can mean hours before backup arrives. I believe my fellow legislators will agree that is not reasonable to continue to ask our VPSOs to walk unarmed into situations that pose obvious dangers. It's my hope that arming these first responders will have a deterrent effect that makes not just the officers but whole communities safer.

Since HB 199 was introduced during the 2013 legislative session, the Department of Public Safety has drafted regulations to allow properly trained VPSOs to carry firearms while on duty. The regulations also detail training and oversight requirements. Passage of HB199 will make the state's support for this policy clear and unambiguous.

It is important to note that neither HB199 nor the new regulations require VPSOs to be armed. While the state funds the VPSO program and the Department of Public Safety provides officers' training and administrative support, it is Alaska's regional Native associations that hire the officers and work with the communities where they are posted. The wishes of individual communities must be respected, and everyone involved must have a thorough understanding of the issues surrounding arming these officers.