

TESTIMONY OF RALPH ANDERSEN
Legislative Work Session on HB-199
(Arming VPSOs)
September 26, 2013

Good morning Representative Edgmon, legislators and staff. Thank you for the opportunity to provide input regarding House Bill 199 and the issue of allowing Village Public Safety Officers to carry firearms. I will be speaking in favor the bill.

~~As you know~~ I am the President and Chief Executive Officer of the Bristol Bay Native Association or "BBNA," and I speak today on behalf of BBNA and its board of directors. BBNA is a regional Alaska Native non-profit corporation and tribal consortium which has operated the VPSO program since its inception more than 30 years ago. ^{Sub need (completion)} ~~I cannot fail to~~ ^{MUST} mention that both of the VPSOs statewide who have died in the line of duty were BBNA employees – Ron Zimin in South Naknek in 1986, and most recently Thomas Madole in Manokotak this past March, both of whom are honored in our hearts and memories.

At present BBNA employs 14 VPSOs, and we could easily fill several additional positions in our region if we had the funding to do. The program has been very successful over the years and there are always more villages that want VPSOs than we have the funding to fill.

BBNA strongly supports changing state policy to allow VPSOs to be armed, with the requisite training. We think this should be a local policy decision for the particular community and the non-profit employer. At present our VPSO contract with the Alaska State Troopers prohibits us from allowing the VPSOs to be armed while on duty. This prohibition is required by the Department of Public Safety regulations governing the program.

We have polled our own VPSOs and every one of them would prefer to carry firearms. This spring, shortly after the death of VPSO Madole, the BBNA Board of Directors adopted

Resolution 2013-07, which called on the Alaska Department of Public Safety to rescind the ban on arming VPSOs. Just two days ago the BBNA board adopted Resolution 2013-14 expressing support for HB 199.

The view expressed by our board members is that it is unreasonable to expect peace officers to be unarmed in communities where virtually every household has firearms and the VPSOs themselves are likely to own weapons for hunting. Many people carry weapons outdoors just for bear protection. We also believe that the social environment of rural Alaska has changed in the last 30 years, and that increased use of ^{Alcohol and} dangerous drugs such as methamphetamines and heroin makes the VPSO's job more hazardous.

Although we support changing state policy to allow VPSOs to be armed, we recognize this should be done through a planned process and that appropriate training will be essential. Perhaps the change can be implemented in stages or through a pilot project. BBNA would volunteer for a pilot project. We also recognize that the role of the VPSO may vary in different places, and that some communities may prefer their VPSOs focus on public safety activities such as search and rescue. That should be a local choice.

We support HB 199 as perhaps a necessary starting point, but note that as introduced it is written in the negative and it is not entirely clear what the impact would be. Currently the DPS regulations prohibit the non-profits from allowing their VPSOs to be armed, but repealing that regulation by itself doesn't require DPS to take positive steps to enable the arming of VPSOs. Clearly there are training needs to be addressed, for example. We do not believe that DPS is necessarily opposed to having VPSOs carry firearms, but they may need a more direct nudge to get them to take action on this issue.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

BRISTOL BAY NATIVE ASSOCIATION

P.O. BOX 310

DILLINGHAM, ALASKA 99576

Ph. (907) 842-5257 Fax (907) 842-5932

RESOLUTION 2013-08

A RESOLUTION URGING THE ALASKA STATE TROOPERS TO WORK MORE CLOSELY WITH, AND IN, THE VILLAGES

WHEREAS: the Bristol Bay Native Association (BBNA) is an Alaska Native regional non-profit corporation and a consortium of the 31 federally recognized tribes of the Bristol Bay region; and

WHEREAS: BBNA has operated the Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) Program since its inception in the 1980s; and

WHEREAS: VPSOs have one of the most dangerous and difficult occupations in Alaska; they are on call 24 hours a day in remote villages, usually without backup in an emergency; and

WHEREAS: The Alaska State Troopers (AST) in rural Alaska are stationed in the hub communities; it is very unlikely that state budgets will ever allow a significant expansion of AST in regard to the number of Troopers in rural Alaska or the number of Trooper posts; and

WHEREAS: The extent of social problems in many villages is well known; rural Alaska communities have disproportionate rates of substance abuse, suicide, domestic violence and related problems, yet many communities are also making real progress in addressing these issues through wellness programs, tribal courts, and other community based efforts; and

WHEREAS: BBNA believes that law enforcement services would be improved in rural Alaska if Troopers spent more time in the villages in non-emergency contexts, mentoring VPSOs, spending time in communities without any resident law enforcement, and filling in during periods VPSOs are out of the village; and


WHEREAS: Among other benefits of this community oriented approach would be the development of trust on the part of village residents, and greater familiarity by the Troopers with local customs, institutions and resources;

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED by the Board of Directors of the Bristol Bay Native Association that it urges the Alaska State Troopers to development a system whereby Troopers are routinely stationed in cooperating villages within their service areas for a week or two at a time.


Fred T. Angasan, Chairman of the Board

CERTIFICATION:

I, the undersigned Secretary of the Bristol Bay Native Association, do hereby certify that the Board of Directors of the Bristol Bay Native Association passed the foregoing resolution at a duly called and noticed meeting on this 22nd day of March, 2013, and that a quorum was present.


Robert Heyano, Secretary

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P.O. BOX 310
DILLINGHAM, ALASKA 99576
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RESOLUTION 2013-10

A RESOLUTION HONORING AND EXPRESSING DEEP APPRECIATION FOR VILLAGE PUBLIC SAFETY OFFICERS AND THE BBNA VILLAGE PUBLIC SAFETY OFFICER PROGRAM

WHEREAS: the Bristol Bay Native Association (BBNA) is an Alaska Native regional non-profit corporation and a consortium of the 31 federally recognized tribes of the Bristol Bay region; and

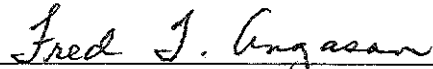
WHEREAS: BBNA has operated the Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) Program since its inception in the 1980s; and

WHEREAS: VPSOs have one of the most dangerous and difficult occupations in Alaska; they are on call 24 hours a day in remote villages and respond to every conceivable emergency service and public safety problem, frequently without backup; and

WHEREAS: Over the last 30 years VPSOs have provided honorable and exemplary service through long hours, hard work, and dedication to their communities; and

WHEREAS: The VPSO program has contributed enormously to public safety and the quality of life in Bristol Bay villages.

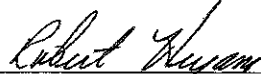
NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED by the Board of Directors of the Bristol Bay Native Association that it honors and expresses heartfelt appreciation and thanks to the VPSO Program and to the Village Public Safety Officers who serve, and have served, so honorably and well in the Bristol Bay Region.



Fred T. Angasan, Chairman of the Board

CERTIFICATION:

I, the undersigned Secretary of the Bristol Bay Native Association, do hereby certify that the Board of Directors of the Bristol Bay Native Association passed the foregoing resolution at a duly called and noticed meeting on this 22nd day of March, 2013, and that a quorum was present.



Robert Heyano, Secretary


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RESOLUTION 2013-07

A RESOLUTION URGING THE ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY TO ALLOW VPSO'S TO BE ARMED

- WHEREAS: the Bristol Bay Native Association (BBNA) is an Alaska Native regional non-profit corporation and a consortium of the 31 federally recognized tribes of the Bristol Bay region; and
- WHEREAS: BBNA has operated the Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) Program since its inception in the 1980s; and
- WHEREAS: VPSOs have one of the most dangerous and difficult occupations in Alaska; they are on call 24 hours a day in remote villages, usually without backup in an emergency, and they are often local residents with relatives in the village; and
- WHEREAS: VPSOs are unarmed in accordance with state policy, yet they serve communities where virtually every household has firearms and where people routinely carry weapons during outside activities for hunting and protection against bears; and
- WHEREAS: There appears to have been an increase in violence directly against VPSOs in recent years; and
- WHEREAS: Given improvements in training VPSOs with some experience are highly trained professionals who are often hired away from the program by municipal police departments; and
- WHEREAS: VPSOs may be the only law enforcement officers in the country who are expected to respond to calls in volatile situations while unarmed and typically without backup;

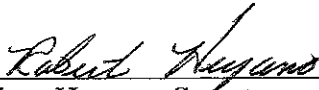
NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED by the Board of Directors of the Bristol Bay Native Association that it urges the State of Alaska, Department of Public Safety, to rescind the current ban on VPSOs carrying firearms.



Fred T. Angasan, Chairman of the Board

CERTIFICATION:

I, the undersigned Secretary of the Bristol Bay Native Association, do hereby certify that the Board of Directors of the Bristol Bay Native Association passed the foregoing resolution at a duly called and noticed meeting on this 22nd day of March, 2013, and that a quorum was present.



Robert Heyano, Secretary

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RESOLUTION 2013-14

**A RESOLUTION IN SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILL 199, A BILL RELATING TO ALASKA
DPS REGULATIONS ALLOWING VPSOS TO CARRY FIREARMS**

- WHEREAS: the Bristol Bay Native Association (BBNA) is an Alaska Native regional non-profit corporation and a consortium of the 31 federally recognized tribes of the Bristol Bay region; and
- WHEREAS: BBNA has operated the Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) Program since its inception in the early 1980s; and
- WHEREAS: VPSOs are unarmed in accordance with state regulation, yet they serve communities where virtually every household has firearms and where people routinely carry weapons during outdoor activities; and
- WHEREAS: There appears to have been an increase in violence directly against VPSOs in recent years and an increase in dangerous drugs in rural Alaska; and
- WHEREAS: Experienced VPSOs are highly trained professionals who are often hired away from the program by municipal police departments, and there is no sound policy reason not to allow properly trained VPSOs to carry firearms; and
- WHEREAS: Representative Bryce Edgmon and numerous co-sponsors have introduced a bill in the Alaska State Legislature, H.B. 199, which would prevent the Alaska Department of Public Safety from barring suitably trained VPSOs from carrying firearms by regulation;

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED by the Board of Directors of the Bristol Bay Native Association that it supports H.B. 199 or similar legislation to allow village public safety officers to carry firearms and urges prompt passage of such legislation by the Alaska State Legislature.


Fred T. Angasan, Chairman of the Board

CERTIFICATION:

I, the undersigned Secretary of the Bristol Bay Native Association, do hereby certify that the Board of Directors of the Bristol Bay Native Association passed the foregoing resolution at a duly called and noticed meeting on this 24th day of September, 2013, and that a quorum was present.


Robert Heyano, Secretary