

Good morning Chairman LeBon and committee members

My name is Chris Hatch. I was born and raised in Chitina Alaska and currently live in Kotzebue . I have been a Volunteer Firefighter and EMS responder since 1992, I began work as a VPSO in 2012 and assumed my current duties as the VPSO coordinator and Rover for the North West Arctic Borough in 2014.

Firstly, I would like to inform members, this trip, and my testimony here today are not incurring any costs from our VPSO grant, or any other state funds. The Northwest Arctic Borough contributes an additional 1.3 million dollars from our general fund towards public safety services in our region and is making use of those funds to pay for my trip to Juneau to appear before your committee.

Let me tell you a little about our region.

There are 11 communities that make up the NWAB. We are the second largest borough in Alaska, comprising approximately 39,000 square miles. With a total population of slightly over 7000 residents. None of our 11 communities are connected by roads and our region lacks many of the public safety services available in urban areas. REGARDLESS, we love our borough, but let me be very honest....providing public safety services is very challenging

During 2018 the NWAB VPSO program responded to 1413 incidents with between 4-6 officer working throughout the year. This is over 200 incidents per officer in communities ranging in size from around 125 – 900 residents.

(data from SOA NAB VPSO Related incident activity pull 1-7-19)

Today, I would like to discuss some of the basic differences between the operations on the Ground, as it were, of the Alaska State Troopers and the VPSO's.

In our regions small communities there are no certified police professionals other than the VPSOs and Alaska State Troopers. Both Officers operate on different models of policing. The Alaska State Troopers operate on a regional hub and spoke response system that relies upon transportation systems that may not be immediately accessible in an emergent situation. In contrast, the VPSO program operates on a locally based community-oriented policing model that facilitates the active building of positive relationships within each village. By residing in the village, the VPSO integrates themselves, and often their families, within these tight-knit communities and knows resident families on a personal level.

What this means is that when a trooper gets up in the morning he or she will get dressed and drive into the office. When they arrive they will open up their computer and look for any incidents that may have happened over night that they will need to investigate today. If there are none, they will begin working on the backlog of cases that always develops over time. Suddenly the Phone will ring, and on the other end of the phone is a person in distress, crying and yelling for help

because they have been assaulted and the suspect has left threatening to return and hurt them again. The trooper tries to gather information about the assault, but suddenly the screaming begins again, he's back, he's outside on the porch, help. The Trooper who may be hours away asks if the suspect has a phone and tries to call that phone to tell him to stay away.

In a community without a VPSO, this situation happens time and time again. It is not the fault of that AST that he cannot provide the immediate protection that the victim of this brutal assault requires.

In a different community that has a VPSO available, in the same situation as above, the AST would contact the VPSO and Assign the case to that VPSO. I as the VPSO would respond whether or not I was on or off duty. In most cases within 15 minutes of the original call I would arrive at the victims house. When I arrive I would see the suspect on the porch wearing a parka and snow pants, I would then know that my Taser if needed will most likely not be effective. In most cases I would have a relationship with the suspect and he would tell me what happened. I would then have to make an arrest decision. The suspect will be yelling at me that he isn't going to go to jail, balling his fists or brandishing whatever weapon he may have. I will arrest him and place him on the back of my snowmachine to take him to the local holding facility, where we will sit together while I write charging documents and reports for this case. We will sit together until the troopers are able to Fly out to my community to transport the prisoner. Depending on weather and flight conditions it can take several days before the troopers arrive.

So, Why all the discussion over a "broken" VPSO program.

Lets start with Salary;

We are paid much less then troopers, for example if AST were to station a first year trooper in Kotzebue they would receive around 100K in salary while a VPSO in his first year would received 52K.

In the NAB Rent averages around 2000 per month, if you work that out it is 24 thousand per year or nearly half of what our VPSO is offered in salary, Could any of you afford to take a job in a remote region of our state that required you to pay nearly half of your 52k per year in salary for rent not including utilities, TV, Phone, Or internet?

Worse yet, the communities that need services the most, often do not have housing that an officer could rent. I regularly travel to all of the communities within our region. Half of these communities have NO housing....no place for my officers to overnight. Often times we sleep in the high school in a classroom or on the gym floor.

However, these aren't the challenges that deter us, our biggest frustration is the lack of acknowledgement of our profession and our professionalism. Our training mirrors that of an state trooper or any other certified law enforcement officer in the state of Alaska, my officers face many of the same public safety challenges as troopers with only a fraction of the equipment or resources to perform our duties.

At this point you are probably asking ...what is the answer?

To be very honest I have no magic solution but we do have ideas and recommendations for a path forward. There is no one size fits all for public safety. Remember our region encompasses 39,000 square miles or approximately a state the size of Indiana. Yes, in rural Alaska we have our own unique challenges but I truly believe we can get there.

Let's take housing. Over the past five years the NAB has been dedicated to improving, in partnership with the state of AK, public safety housing in our region, and we have been successful.

Five years ago we had only one available (Sub Standard) house for a public safety officer in the entire region. Today we have housing available in five outlying communities with two more communities providing buildings this year that we can remodel and convert into housing for our officers. Another option, What about converting some of the numerous CONNEX trailers into offices, holding facilities and overnight housing units. We take this idea from Maniilaq Health Association, that converted connex trailers into multiple housing units for health providers in Kotzebue. They have been a hit.

We have provided suggestions to bring the VPSO to a level that is comparable to other public safety programs with little or no additional cost to the state, and Several legislators are working to help restructure the VPSO program. May I suggest you begin with a pilot project in a small region to work on all of the issues.

Community buy in, adoption of local ordinances, coordination with other state, local and tribal organizations will be essential components of this effort. It is not just about salary and housing, we must take a comprehensive approach if we truly hope to improve public safety in rural Alaska.

As a home rule government entity, the northwest arctic borough stands ready to work towards this solution.

It's time.