

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE



Senator Donald C. Olson

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Sponsor Statement SB 231

“An Act requiring background investigations of village public safety officer applicants by the Department of Public Safety; relating to the village public safety officers program; and providing for an effective date.”

This bill was introduced to implement the nine recommendations of the VPSO Working Group’s report which was adopted on January 24, 2020.

Created in the late 1970’s, the Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) program’s stated purpose is to assist in the protection of “life and property” and coordinate probation and parole in rural communities.

Currently, ten entities operate VPSO grants. Eight of the ten grantees are regionally based nonprofit corporations whose missions are to cultivate self-determination among local tribal citizens. One is a federally recognized tribe, and the Northwest Arctic Borough, a home rule regional government seated in Kotzebue, is the only grantee organization that is a municipal government.

While the VPSO program has provided valuable service to participating areas, the past decade has seen shrinking numbers of VPSOs, significant difficulty in recruitment and retention of officers, and community needs that surpass the current duties of VPSOs. There is undoubtedly a need to address the crisis in public safety infrastructure and service in rural Alaska.

On May 9th, 2019, Senate President Cathy Giessel and House Speaker Bryce Edgmon announced the creation of a Joint House/Senate Working Group to provide substantive policy recommendations related to the VPSO program.

Appointed to the working group were: Senator Donny Olson, Co-Chair; Representative Chuck Kopp, Co-Chair; Senator Click Bishop; Senator Mike Shower; Representative Bryce Edgmon; and Representative George Rauscher.

The working group was assigned to coordinate with stakeholders to examine the underlying causes of the recruitment and retention obstacle and provide proposals to turn around the epidemic rate of personnel turnover within the VPSO program.

The working group held meetings, attended community meetings, participated in listening sessions, and worked with stakeholders to arrive at the proposals outlined in this report. The proposals primarily address the core problem of increasing the number of VPSOs available to communities.

The bill incorporates the Working Group's nine short term recommendations into statutes:

Recommendation 1. Update the VPSO statutes to provide a clear law enforcement and public safety vision and mission for the program and provide VPSO personnel clear law enforcement duties and powers.

Recommendation 2. Create more financial flexibility for the VPSO grantee organizations in the updated VPSO statutes.

Recommendation 3. Restore VPSO funding levels to FY18 levels.

Recommendation 4. Fund unfunded mandates.

Recommendation 5. Related to Recommendation 4, in an updated VPSO statute, mandate that grant awards pay grantee organization their full indirect costs.

Recommendation 6. Move financial grant management to the Department of Commerce, Community, and Economic Development.

Recommendation 7. Maintain operational advisory, training, and experience requirement oversight at the Department of Public Safety.

Recommendation 8. In statute create a Tribal/Grantee organization consultation process before the Department can change training and experience requirements.

Recommendation 9. Revised versions (consistent with the recommendations of the Working Group report) of current VPSO regulations need to be placed in statute in order to operationalize the VPSO program and to facilitate the grant management moving to the Department of Commerce.

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