

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE**  
**HOUSE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON TRIBAL AFFAIRS**

February 24, 2022  
8:02 a.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Representative Tiffany Zulkosky, Chair  
Representative Dan Ortiz  
Representative Geran Tarr  
Representative Mike Cronk

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

Representative Zack Fields

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

PRESENTATION: VILLAGE PUBLIC SAFETY OFFICER PROGRAM

- HEARD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

No previous action to record

**WITNESS REGISTER**

JIM COCKRELL, Commissioner  
Department of Public Safety  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Introduced himself during the presentation on the Village Public Safety Officer Program.

JOEL HARD, Director  
Village Public Safety Officer Program  
Department of Public Safety  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Gave a presentation on the Village Public Safety Officer Program.

MICHAEL NEMETH, Coordinator  
Village Public Safety Program  
Department of Family & Community Development  
Aleutian Pribilof Island Association  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Provided comment during the presentation on the Village Public Safety Officer Program.

RICHARD PETERSON, President  
Central Council of the Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Provided comment during the presentation on the Village Public Safety Officer Program.

#### **ACTION NARRATIVE**

[8:02:38 AM](#)

**CHAIR TIFFANY ZULKOSKY** called the House Special Committee on Tribal Affairs meeting to order at 8:02 a.m. Representatives Cronk, Ortiz, Tarr, and Zulkosky were present at the call to order.

#### **Presentation: Village Public Safety Officer Program**

[8:03:27 AM](#)

CHAIR ZULKOSKY announced that the only order of business would be a presentation on the Village Public Safety Officer Program (VPSO) [report and findings can be found in the committee packet].

[8:04:45 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JAMES COCKRELL, Commissioner, Department of Public Safety (DPS), mentioned moving the Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) program out of Alaska State Trooper office and into the of the direct jurisdiction of the Commissioner of Public Safety. He stated his goal to provide law enforcement equally throughout that state by focusing on the needs of rural Alaska.

[8:08:08 AM](#)

JOEL HARD, Director of the Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) Program, commented on the working group document and agreed that updates are needed to the structural statute because it was written 40 years ago. He mentioned that certain regulations need to be changed or omitted and gave an example that "no-presence or transient presence has not reduced crime." Understanding that state resources alone cannot solve the shortcomings of the VPSO program, he said it will be necessary to coordinate with the federal government. He mentioned that

through ANSCA, the federal government retains responsibility for welfare and safety of tribal communities in Alaska. He mentioned in response to a question about the perception of respect among VPSOs and troopers, that troopers rely on VPSOs every day and since the VPSO program has moved into the commissioner's office, the perception has been elevated. He also referred to a study that showed that the presence of a VPSO in a rural village significantly increases sexual assault prosecution rates.

[8:23:47 AM](#)

CHAIR TIFFANY ZULKOSKY recognized the many difficulties of working as a Village Public Safety Officer as a first responder in sensitive situations that may be affecting familiar community members and loved ones.

[8:25:40 AM](#)

MR. HARD added that distress regarding the Village Public Safety Officer program comes from unclear expectations and is increasingly more complex compared with 40 years ago. He pointed out the need to utilize regional leaders in the program and address the specific needs and levels of attention required of each rural Alaskan village. He added that a regional public safety model would, through clarified expectations, make it easier to train and certify VPSOs to necessary standards.

[8:29:39 AM](#)

CHAIR TIFFANY ZULKOSKI added that trooper-only-response fails the community and is inadequate.

[8:31:42 AM](#)

MR. HARD, in response to a question posed by Representative Tarr, referenced SB 81 and HB 131. He commented about the necessity for the program to support the infrastructure which in turn impacts issues with retention. He further emphasized the need to coordinate with the federal government and its obligations and capacities to create a coordinated and collaborative approach to village public safety in Alaska.

[8:33:53 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GERAN TARR commented on behalf of a student she met at the Youth Leadership Institute, who asked about what

public officials would do about housing for teachers and public safety officers. She noted that "even the youth are noticing" those needs in their communities.

8:36:41 AM

MICHAEL NEMETH mentioned that he has been a VPSO Coordinator for 20 years. He acknowledged the successful partnerships among the VPSO Working Group and applauded the transition under the current commissioner. He claimed that the VPSO is distressed due to different management styles and support over the years. He detailed attempts to combat hiring and retention issues by partnering with different organizations like NW Strategies who helped to create a multimedia campaign for the VPSO Program. Additionally, Alaska Executive Search, Inc. found 200 more applicants. He also reported on a method to obtain recruits through a Department of Defense SkillBridge Program for soldiers leaving service that still want to serve in the community. He commented that the program and mission have morphed significantly over the years and current statutes and regulations no longer reflect the scope of the program it is today. He noted that this is the first year VPSO put in a CIP request for funds for admin costs and infrastructure. He detailed that a Village Public Safety Officer is a multi-faceted public safety professional. Being a VPSO involves four disciplines, law enforcement, fire suppression and prevention, emergency medical services, and search and rescue. In response to a committee question, he stated that the starting salary for a VPSO is approximately \$60,000, and starting salary for a state trooper is about \$74,000. Grants through nonprofit organizations that oversee VPSO units make it possible to get some funding for things like vehicles and give coordinators the ability to occasionally "flex" funding to suit specific needs.

8:57:55 AM

RICHARD PETERSON, President of the Central Council of the Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska, spoke about the vast improvements that have occurred within the Village Public Safety Officer program since Commissioner Cockrell became involved. Mr. Peterson recognized his efforts to bring equity for public safety for rural Alaskans. He discussed that grants can be used to acquire vehicles for VPSOs, but more funding is necessary in the state's budget to unburden villages from providing housing and office space for their VPSO. He discussed the difficulties faced in recruitment and retention because of the demanding

hours and the nature of the work requiring the VPSO to be on call 24/7.

[9:10:42 AM](#)

**ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further business before the committee, the House Special Committee on Tribal Affairs meeting was adjourned at 9:11 a.m.