

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE COMMUNITY AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS STANDING COMMITTEE

February 6, 2024

8:02 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative CJ McCormick, Chair
Representative Kevin McCabe, Vice Chair
Representative Tom McKay
Representative Thomas Baker
Representative Justin Ruffridge
Representative Rebecca Himschoot
Representative Donna Mears

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

OTHER LEGISLATORS PRESENT

Representative Andrew Gray

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

OVERVIEW: DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

JAMES COCKRELL, Commissioner
Department of Public Safety
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented a PowerPoint on the Department of Public Safety.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[8:02:55 AM](#)

CHAIR MCCORMICK called the House Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:02 a.m.

Representatives McKay, Baker, Mears, McCabe, and McCormick were present at the call to order. Representatives Himschoot and Ruffridge arrived as the meeting was in progress. Also present was Representative Gray.

OVERVIEW: Department of Public Safety

[8:04:00 AM](#)

CHAIR MCCORMICK announced that the only order of business would be an overview of the Department of Public Safety (DPS).

[8:04:40 AM](#)

JAMES COCKRELL, Commissioner, Department of Public Safety (DPS), presented a PowerPoint, entitled "Department of Public Safety Overview" [hard copy included in the committee packet]. He shared the department's mission and key objectives and gave an overview of the organizational chart.

[8:09:12 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL, in response to a series of committee questions, stated that if the Matanuska-Susitna (Mat-Su) Borough had a police department, the Alaska State Troopers (AST) would focus on providing a more proactive response to highway enforcement and major crime investigations; AST provides higher level support to police departments across the state, and vice versa; there could be potential for creating a Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) position for the road system, similar to a reserve sheriff, with a change in statute; the VPSO program was recently restructured to cement the program's longevity by instituting a director; the issue of domestic violence is a societal, statewide issue that could not be solved by increasing the number of troopers.

[8:27:20 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL resumed the presentation by discussing the coordination of victims' services and the department's statewide impact, highlighting the state's accredited crime lab. In response to a committee question, he did not think it would be prudent to create smaller crime labs across the state.

[8:32:44 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL gave an overview of the department's successes in 2023, including 20 new graduates from the academy; the creation of a quarterly missing and murdered indigenous persons (MMIP) report, body cameras deployed on all troopers, Bristol Bay and Area M fishery enforcement, and the deployment of the Sexual Assault Examination Kit Tracking system. He detailed the organization of the Division of Alaska State Troopers: four detachments, Alaska Bureau of Investigations, Statewide Drug and Alcohol Enforcement, Dispatch Services, and Statewide support. The division's accomplishments include significant drug investigations and seizures, solved cold cases, MMIP unit, equipment and training upgrades, and 24/7 high-quality public safety service. The division faces challenges, such as recruitment and retention, rural housing, and illicit drug and alcohol importation.

[8:45:59 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL, in response to a series of committee question, said federal bureaucracy presents a challenge for trooper housing, which would be a talking point at an upcoming meeting with Alaska's congressional delegation; U.S. Senator Murkowski granted the department \$3 million for housing; a request for proposal (RFP) was presented for 17 housing units in Nome.

[8:48:00 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL continued the presentation with an overview of the Division of Alaska Wildlife Troopers. The division's accomplishments include successful prosecutions of violators in statewide commercial fisheries, boating safety education and enforcement, and the prevention of unlawful commercialization of Alaska's resources. Challenges faced by the division are the 6,640 miles of coastline in Alaska, the state's complicated regulatory structure and limited resources, and the increasing demand for wildlife troopers across the state. As of January 1, 2024, the department had a vacancy rate of 17 percent. He acknowledged that the department needs to increase the number of state troopers and wildlife troopers. He addressed the DPS aircraft and marine section, indicating that the aircraft fleet had been modernized with the help of the administration and the legislature.

[8:55:14 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL, in response to committee questions, stated that aircraft are the backbone of the department, and the job could not be done without them; PC-12s are necessary to respond to serious crimes and active events in remote villages; the department has a combination of both trooper pilots and professional pilots.

[9:02:45 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL continued the discussion of the aircraft and marine sections. He said DPS is looking to replace its noncommissioned patrol vessel in Southeast Alaska. He explained that patrol vessels are set up as "floating offices" to conduct investigations and community policing. He reported that James Hoelscher is the new director of the Village Public Safety Officer Division. A Tribal liaison was also assigned to the program.

[9:06:27 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL, in response to a series of committee questions, stated that grantees were funded by the state to run the VPSO program; the department is considering reinstating the regional public safety officers as an elevated VPSO position - similar to a supervisor - to provide training and support; jails in rural Alaska are inadequate and need to be addressed.

[9:13:16 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL resumed the presentation with a summary of the Division of Fire and Life Safety. Challenges faced by the division included limited fire response capabilities and fire education resources, in addition to deputy fire marshal recruitment. He outlined the organizational structure of the department's statewide support component and the Victim Services Division, which house the Council on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault (CDVSA), the Violent Crimes Compensation Board, the Victim Navigator Unit, the Domestic Violence Training Unit, and the Missing Persons Clearinghouse for MMIP. He highlighted the vibrancy of the wellness program that was created in 2020. Peer support and critical incident response teams have also been implemented to help officers who are struggling with the stresses of the job. He noted that the wellness program is in the process of hiring a mental health professional for the team. He expressed confidence that the department is headed in the right direction and would continue to focus on providing a higher level of public safety to Alaskans.

9:24:30 AM

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL, in response to committee questions, said the state needs to invest in 911 in rural Alaska. He shared his recent experience on patrol in the Mat-Su.

9:31:06 AM

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 9:31 a.m.