

HOUSE FINANCE COMMITTEE  
February 21, 2023  
1:33 p.m.

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CALL TO ORDER

Co-Chair Johnson called the House Finance Committee meeting to order at 1:33 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Bryce Edgmon, Co-Chair  
Representative DeLena Johnson, Co-Chair  
Representative Julie Coulombe  
Representative Mike Cronk  
Representative Alyse Galvin  
Representative Sara Hannan  
Representative Andy Josephson  
Representative Dan Ortiz  
Representative Will Stapp  
Representative Frank Tomaszewski

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative Neal Foster, Co-Chair

ALSO PRESENT

Bryan Barlow, Deputy Commissioner, Department of Public Safety; James Cockrell, Commissioner, Department of Public Safety; Pam Halloran, Administrative Services Director, Department of Public Safety, Office of Management and Budget, Office of the Governor.

SUMMARY

HB 39 APPROP: OPERATING BUDGET/LOANS/FUND; SUPP

HB 39 was HEARD and HELD in committee for further consideration.

HB 41 APPROP: MENTAL HEALTH BUDGET

HB 39 was HEARD and HELD in committee for further consideration.

OVERVIEW: FY 2024 BUDGET BY DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY

Co-Chair Johnson reviewed the meeting agenda.

#hb39

#hb41

HOUSE BILL NO. 39

"An Act making appropriations for the operating and loan program expenses of state government and for certain programs; capitalizing funds; amending appropriations; making reappropriations; making supplemental appropriations; making appropriations under art. IX, sec. 17(c), Constitution of the State of Alaska, from the constitutional budget reserve fund; and providing for an effective date."

HOUSE BILL NO. 41

"An Act making appropriations for the operating and capital expenses of the state's integrated comprehensive mental health program; and providing for an effective date."

^OVERVIEW: FY 2024 BUDGET BY DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY

1:35:05 PM

JAMES COCKRELL, COMMISSIONER, DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY, introduced the PowerPoint presentation, "Department of Public Safety FY2024 Department Budget Overview" dated February 21, 2023 (copy on file). He began by thanking the committee for hearing the presentation and thanked the members of the Department of Public Safety (DPS) subcommittee. He thought the subcommittee meetings were open and productive. After years of budget cuts, DPS was making strides forwards thanks to the legislature. The department was given more resources in the prior year which had turned into new positions within DPS. The overall crime rate in the state was down significantly and drug enforcement agents were busy intercepting contraband at airports, ferry docks, and other areas throughout the state. The department had hired two investigators to focus

directly on missing and murdered indigenous people and had revitalized the Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) program. He relayed that DPS was also moving forward with a body camera program and it hoped to have the Alaska State Troopers (AST) equipped with cameras by the summer. He thought the cameras would increase transparency, instill trust in the citizens of the state, and protect the troopers. He hoped that the department and the legislature could continue making improvements and make Alaska the safest state in the nation.

Mr. Cockrell began on slide 2 of the presentation. When he took over the department a few years prior, his goal was to ensure that DPS's mandate was met, which was to recruit and retain the best troopers, VPSOs, and administrative and technical staff. He relayed that the department was particularly attentive to rural areas of the state. Another primary focus was the high level of sexual assault and domestic violence in the state as it still had the highest rates per capita in the nation. The department was also focused on major crime investigations including homicides, assaults, and drug investigations. There were currently 982 permanent full-time staff and 12 permanent part-time staff at DPS. He explained that the part-time staff focused on particular problems or cases. The current DPS budget was just under \$300 million.

Mr. Cockrell moved to slide 3 and detailed the statewide impact of the department. He thought the Department of Administration (DOA) was the only department that had a larger impact on the state than DPS. He explained that DPS provided law enforcement patrol and investigations around the state as well as first rate resource protection. He reiterated the department's focus on domestic violence, sexual assault, and victim services programs. He added that DPS also provided special patrols, performed search and rescue activities, and managed the Alaska Public Safety Information Network (APSIN).

Mr. Cockrell advanced to slide 4 which detailed the organizational system within the department.

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Co-Chair Johnson asked for more information on the division directors and the number of years the directors had been with the department.

Mr. Cockrell responded that the colonel for AST was Maurice Hughes, who had been with the troopers for over 30 years. The colonel for the Alaska Wildlife Troopers (AWT) was Bernard Chastain, who had been with the department for about 25 years. The Fire and Life Safety (FLS) director was Lloyd Nakano, who had been with the department for over 20 years. The interim director of the VPSO program was retired Colonel Joel Hard who worked for the department for over 20 years and also spent around 20 years with the National Park Service. The director of Administrative Services was Pam Halloran and he was uncertain how long she had been with the department.

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PAM HALLORAN, ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICES DIRECTOR, DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY, OFFICE OF MANAGEMENT AND BUDGET, OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR, stated that she had been with the department since June of 2022.

Mr. Cockrell added that the aforementioned individuals were all of the division directors.

Co-Chair Johnson understood that most of the directors were close to retirement age.

Mr. Cockrell confirmed that most of the department's command staff were eligible for retirement.

Representative Ortiz referred to slide 2 of the presentation. He asked if there had been a study on how the consolidation of dispatch services had contributed to accomplishing the department's key objective to improve law enforcement and safety in rural Alaska.

Mr. Cockrell responded that there were still significant strides to be made when it came to providing emergency services to rural areas of the state. There were two dispatch centers, one in Mat-Su and one in Kenai, which provided professional support in the two regions. The department was still struggling to establish adequate dispatch services in areas of Western Alaska. The department was working with phone companies to upgrade the cell phone towers to increase the range of service for 911 calls. He relayed that the process would take cooperation from DPS and the telecommunication companies.

Representative Cronk asked how many 911 calls in rural Alaska were dropped.

Mr. Cockrell responded that he had been told that up to 25 percent of calls were dropped.

Ms. Halloran continued on slide 5 reflecting the governor's amended FY 24 budget request, which was almost \$300,000 with the supplemental included. The total request was a \$14 million increase over the FY 23 management plan. She noted that there were many factors that contributed to the budget request. The goal was to align the budget with the expenditures as they occurred, focusing on meeting the rising costs related to fleet vehicles and funding positions that were either underfunded or unfunded. She was brought on in June of 2022 and came from another state agency that was similar to DPS and she knew what it was like to work within a reactive agency. She was working to establish controls and transparency in regard to expenditures.

Representative Cronk asked for more information on the "other" category on slide 5.

Ms. Halloran responded that the funds in the other category referred to interagency authority. Additionally, the Council on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault (CDVSA) and the Violent Crimes Compensation Board (VCCB) received other funds in the form of restorative justice funds.

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Representative Galvin asked if the other funds also included the collaboration between DPS and telecommunication companies. Hearing that 25 percent of calls [911] were dropped helped her understand why the state had high rates of domestic violence.

Ms. Halloran responded in the negative. The other funds were specifically used by agencies to provide services to each other and any telecommunication services would not be included.

Representative Galvin asked where the funding would need to be in order to facilitate collaboration with telecommunication entities and strengthen the system.

Mr. Cockrell responded that the funding on the state side was not the issue. The issue was the amount of money it would cost the telecommunication companies to advance the cell towers to be "phase II" compliant. The department could not force compliance, but he thought there should be an obligation on the companies' part to provide adequate communications to ensure Alaskans in rural areas of the state had reliable access to 911 services.

Representative Galvin asked how the legislature could help encourage the telecommunication companies to collaborate with the department to deliver important emergency services to every Alaskan.

Co-Chair Johnson commented that there was a large sum of money for broadband services that would soon be coming to the state.

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Representative Stapp asked for clarification about the unfunded positions mentioned by Ms. Halloran. He asked if there were salary savings from the unfunded positions.

Ms. Halloran responded that the supplemental was not covering payroll. There were two elements in the supplemental bill: the first was the supplemental itself, which addressed the anticipated cost overages in FY 23; the second was the ratification, which covered cost overages that the department was unable to address because it ran out of budget authority in FY 22, which included funding payroll. The supplemental was primarily covering the travel, services, and commodities lines.

Representative Stapp understood that there was a specific request in the supplemental due to overtime hours worked. He thought positions that were funded and not filled would incur salary savings that could be used to cover overtime expenses. He asked if the funding request was in addition to the savings.

Ms. Halloran responded that positions that were not funded would fall under the personal service line item. There would be no savings without budget authority. She offered to walk the committee through the supplemental.

Representative Stapp declined the offer.

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Representative Josephson relayed that he was told that DPS was billing a sister agency. He asked which agency the department was billing.

Ms. Halloran responded that the departments were billing each other and the various divisions were providing services to each other. For example, CDVSA provided some funding to AST to assist with domestic violence training and awareness for troopers. Similar to DOA, DPS charged its divisions for administrative services provided by the commissioner's office. The department also had a Reimbursable Service Agreement (RSA) with the courts and with corrections.

Representative Josephson asked if the ratification referred to a new Public Safety Employees Association (PSEA) contract.

Ms. Halloran responded that the ratification was part of the supplemental bill. It provided a mechanism through which the department could capture costs that were not captured in FY 22 because expenditures had exceeded the department's authorization.

Representative Josephson responded that he heard from FLS that it could receive emergency declarations and the governor could unilaterally make withdrawals from the treasury for funding. He understood that DPS did not have the same option and that the department had outstanding bills that needed to be ratified.

Ms. Halloran responded that Representative Josephson was correct in that there were outstanding bills. The employees of the department were essentially paid in FY 22, but the accounting system did not allow for the expenditures to go through. The ratification process allowed the department to come before the legislature and request an appropriation to fund the expenditures.

Ms. Halloran continued on slide 6 and detailed the FLS Division. She explained that the division included the Plan Review Bureau, the Life and Safety Inspection Bureau, the Bureau of Accreditation Standards and Time, and the Alaska

Fire Standards Council. The division performed building inspections and plan reviews and worked closely with VPSOs to improve fire safety in rural Alaska.

Representative Cronk asked where the 32 full-time positions were based.

Ms. Halloran responded that the positions were primarily based in Anchorage but that there were some deputy fire marshals based in Bethel and Fairbanks as well.

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Ms. Halloran continued to slide 7 which was a series of graphs comparing the governor's FY 22, FY 23, and FY 24 amend request. The FY 24 budget was just over \$7 million with a \$300,000 increase over FY 23, which provided for a deputy fire marshal in Juneau. The help provided by the new position would promote faster investigations into fire instances in Southeast Alaska as well as help preserve evidence.

Ms. Halloran moved to slide 8 and the AST division. She indicated that it was the largest division within DPS by a wide margin and that 60 percent of the budget request was intended for AST. The division provided a variety of services, including a robust drug and addiction program, criminal investigations, search and rescue, law enforcement, and court services. The division also included the AWT division, which she referred to as a "division within a division."

Ms. Halloran advanced to slide 9, which reflected the AST budget request. She reiterated that the majority of the supplemental request was within the AST division and the request totaled \$182 million.

Co-Chair Johnson commented that the governor's amended budget represented a significant increase for DPS. She wondered what happened to necessitate such a substantial increase.

Ms. Halloran responded that there were decisions made in the governor's amended budget by the governor's office. She presumed that the increase related to the changing price of oil. The additional funding request was important to prevent DPS from needing to implement the ratification

process. For example, there was a request for over \$2 million for vehicle costs and a request that aligned service authority for wildlife troopers as the division's total authorization had been exceeded. Additionally, costs were rising for other services, such as uniforms, mental health services, and costs for upkeep and maintenance of equipment. The department compared the costs from FY 21 and FY 22 and requested the difference.

Ms. Halloran moved to slide 10 and detailed the VPSO program. The program consisted of ten regional programs managed by regional tribes and organizations. The program included grant funds to perform statutorily required services such as fire prevention and suppression, emergency medical support, search and rescue, investigations, law enforcement, and public safety training.

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Representative Josephson commented that there were 68 VPSOs and about 230 villages in the state. He asked whether a typical village had law enforcement.

Mr. Cockrell responded that there were about 68 "boots on the ground" VPSOs stationed at many different villages around the state. He thought that rural Alaska had been underserved since statehood and the only way to serve the entire state was to allocate more resources to rural areas. Many of the villages had dedicated troopers, but other troopers were tasked with serving multiple villages.

Representative Stapp asked what the minimum allowable age was for a VPSO.

Mr. Cockrell responded 18 years old. The grantees involved in the VPSO program worked closely together with the department to fill all the positions. The department had a lot more flexibility due to a bill that passed in the prior year and had sufficient funds to continue to look for housing for VPSOs. He emphasized how critical VPSOs were to DPS and to the state. He relayed that VPSOs did not only conduct law enforcement, but assisted in firefighting, search and rescues, medical assistance, and many other duties. He opined that a village could not prosper unless the citizens within the village felt safe. He noted that many areas in the state were not represented by law enforcement and he thought the state should do better.

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Representative Hannan commented that a bright spot in the public safety mission during the four years she had been in the legislature was the VPSO program. She thought the change in commissioner as well as the program being moved from AST and into the commissioner's office contributed greatly to the program's success. In addition, the change to the law that allowed two VPSOs to be posted in the same community was a significant improvement. She thought that AST was not designed to conduct community policing, while VPSOs were trained specifically for the duty. She thought that the state had seemed to have taken a turn and was moving in the right direction. She did not think the number of officers on the ground was sufficient yet, but she was pleased that the goal was to build towards increased numbers. She thanked Mr. Cockrell for his leadership.

Representative Coulombe asked if the VPSOs were armed and what kind of accountability there was for VPSOs who exhibited bad behavior.

Mr. Cockrell responded that VPSOs were not armed. There were two VPSOs that had been shot and killed since the start of the program. There was statutory authority that allowed VPSOs to be armed, however the officers were not currently armed. He deferred the second question to a colleague.

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BRYAN BARLOW, DEPUTY COMMISSIONER, DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY, responded that any internal investigations were conducted by a VPSO's employer and DPS assisted in the effort.

Representative Coulombe asked what it meant to be investigated by an employer.

Mr. Barlow replied that VPSOs were not employees of DPS but were employees of the non-profit organizations to which they were assigned.

Co-Chair Johnson suggested that members keep the questioning pertinent to the budget.

Co-Chair Edgmon thanked the department for its attention to the VPSO program as well as the coordinators of the program who were part of the VPSO working group. He recalled that there were around 120 VPSOs many years ago and it seemed there were efforts to advance the program to a similar level once more. He asked about Colonel Joel Hard's designation as a retired officer as he had understood that Colonel Hard was currently working.

Mr. Cockrell responded that Colonel Hard was working a "full-time part-time" position. He decided to call upon Colonel Hard to increase stability in the program as the colonel had worked closely with the grantees to build the program. The program had "bounced around" within the trooper agency since its inception and the instability did not make for a successful program. He understood the reason for the constant changes and did not fault anyone for it. The VPSO program had been moved to the commissioner's office and a new director had been appointed in order to allow Colonel Hard to return to retirement. The new full-time director would allow for an increased level of accountability and stability within the program. If the program failed, it was the responsibility of the commissioner to fix the problems. The department was committed to fostering the success of the program.

Co-Chair Edgmon asked when the VPSO program was under the AST division.

Mr. Cockrell responded that the program had been within the AST division since its inception. He wanted to see the program within the commissioner's office and noted that Colonel Hard had been the director for about a year and a half.

Representative Josephson understood that the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) had asked some departments to eliminate the positions it could not fill. He asked if DPS was one of those departments.

Mr. Cockrell responded that the previous administration had asked DPS to eliminate unfilled positions, but it was not the case with the current administration.

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Ms. Halloran continued on slide 11. She explained that the VPSO budget was increased in the governor's amend in order to accommodate ten additional officers as well as provide funding for housing and offices. She explained that the total request was an additional \$20 million.

Ms. Halloran advanced to slide 12 which detailed the Statewide Support Division. She explained that the division housed the commissioner's officer, administrative services, the crime lab, criminal justice information systems program, and the Alaska Public Safety Communication Services Agency. Much of the work of the division reached multiple agencies and divisions throughout the state. She continued to slide 13 and indicated that the budget request for the division was just over \$53 million, which was a \$2.8 million increase over the FY 23 management plan.

Ms. Halloran continued on slide 14 and detailed the Alaska Police Standards Council (APSC). The council provided training and ensured compliance and standards for training for police, correctional officers, probation officers, parole officers, and municipal correction offices. There was no significant budget request associated with the council.

Ms. Halloran moved to slide 19 and offered information on CDVSA. Through grants, the council supported prevention, victim services, and rehabilitation programs across the state. She advanced to slide 17 and relayed that the FY 24 request for CDVSA was just under \$32 million.

Ms. Halloran continued to slide 18 and detailed VCCB. She indicated that the board facilitated payments to innocent persons and victims of crime such as homicide, assault, arson, child abuse, sexual assault, driving under the influence, and robbery. Expenditures could include funeral costs, burial expenses, lost wages, medical expenses, mental health costs, relocation, safety, security, crime scene clean up, and travel.

Mr. Cockrell added that DCP inherited VCCB from the DOA about a year and a half ago. The board was set up in 1973 and had three employees and 15 claims. In the present day, the board had three employees and received over 1,000 claims. The department asked for two additional positions to provide critical support to victims of violent crime. The board provided support to many victims who could not

afford to support themselves. The ability to provide support to victims was a valuable asset to the state. The two new requested positions were not funded; therefore, the funds would come from the restorative justice fund. He was fearful that the available funding for victims would be reduced.

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Ms. Halloran moved to slide 19 and the budget for VCCB. The budget request was \$4.2 million, which was a significant increase and would help stabilize the work of the board. There was a large increase in the fund source of "other" which referred to the restorative justice funds. The funds would also support two positions: a paralegal and an administrative officer. All salaries for all employees on the board would come from the restorative justice account, which she acknowledged was a volatile account due to its dependency on the Permanent Fund Dividend (PFD).

Representative Cronk asked what the target number was for VPSOs and whether there were any upcoming partnerships for the program.

Mr. Cockrell responded that the department had funding for 65 VPSOs but his target was around 120. He thought 120 would be ideal and there appeared to be a "magic number" at which all of the trooper and VPSO positions remained filled. He emphasized the importance of continuing to provide support for the program and support for the rural areas of the state.

Representative Cronk thought that it was worthwhile to mention the troopers' two-weeks-on and two-weeks-off schedule. He asked if it was beneficial for new troopers to live in one area of the state for two weeks and work in another area for two weeks. He wondered if it would cost the troopers money to repeatedly take two weeks away from home. He acknowledged that more experienced troopers would likely still be making money but was concerned that newer troopers would not make enough money to justify the job or the schedule.

Mr. Cockrell responded that there was a financial advantage depending on seniority. The decision that DOA made to reduce the cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) from 100 percent to 50 percent had affected the ability of DPS to

assign troopers to rural posts. Troopers within Tier II did not get overtime but some other troopers did receive overtime. He noted that troopers would be paying rent either way but it was a continuous struggle to get troopers out to rural Alaska. A trooper recently left the division because the individual did not want to be posted in rural Alaska. Decent housing, office space, and internet were important elements in making a rural post more desirable; however, the improvements could be expensive.

Mr. Cockrell continued that he did not think that the state had ever grasped the concept that rural Alaska needed better service and he did not think much procedural progress had been made since the 1960s. He emphasized that the amount of victimization in rural areas of the state was outlandish. The department was focused on improving the situation in rural Alaska and had increased the number of crime investigators in rural areas. He stated that DPS was committed to providing law enforcement services to all areas of the state, regardless of zip code. He thought conversation with the legislature was important and that law makers should be appraised of the activity of law enforcement. He valued meetings with the legislature and valued learning about the members' concerns.

Representative Cronk appreciated Mr. Cockrell's comments and thought that the attitude towards change was promising.

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Representative Stapp asked about the supplemental budget request from FY 23. He understood that in the FY 23 request, there were trooper positions that were budgeted for and filled but were not funded adequately due to the added need for new vehicles and equipment. The newly hired troopers were not able to do their jobs because the necessary equipment and support was not provided. He asked if the costs of the new positions included the required equipment.

Ms. Halloran responded that the positions had been allocated to the department without funding. There were many costs associated with a position such as outfitting an employee with a vehicle. She confirmed that the cost of the vehicle was in the FY 23 supplemental request and the department would order the vehicles as soon as the supplemental came through.

Mr. Cockrell was not certain he understood the question. There were only three positions that DPS decided against filling. The unfilled positions were wildlife trooper positions for which the department received no funding. He relayed that 51 troopers were put through the [AST] academy in the prior year. He reiterated that he did not understand the question, but if the question was whether DPS was holding back on hiring troopers, the answer was that the department was absolutely not holding back.

Representative Stapp clarified that he was trying to understand the process. He wanted to ensure that when a position was budgeted for, the entire cost of the position was included in the budget request.

Mr. Cockrell responded that there was a formula that DPS relied upon to determine the costs.

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Representative Josephson noted that a few years ago, the state received a grant from the U.S. Justice Department because the national media was reporting about the lack of attention to rural justice in the state. He asked if the federal support and attention resulted in a permanent shift in rural justice in Alaska or if the "fanfare" melted away and resulted in an eventual return to the status quo.

Mr. Cockrell responded that the money from the federal government was received passively and DPS did not receive any money directly. He understood that the grants were used for building housing. The department was always looking at ways to better provide services which required support from the administration and the legislature. The department never had a consistent fund source and it was still "digging out of the hole" that was caused by the previous administration due to 40 trooper positions and 40 staff positions being cut. There was a lot of positive momentum over the past few years and it was a team effort. He added that hiring more troopers and VPSOs for rural communities was a slow process.

Representative Josephson understood that there was a hierarchy within DPS, but VPSOs were not peace officers and were not organized. If a VPSO were to be killed in the field, the officer's family would not get health insurance.

He thought that the coverage for a VPSO was substantially different than that of other law enforcement officers. He wondered if VPSOs should be given an elevated position in the hierarchy.

Mr. Cockrell replied that he saw VPSOs as the same as all of the other troopers. The feedback that the department had received from its grantees was that troopers were providing the necessary support. He indicated that the department had been looking at hiring a different type of VPSO, referred to as a Rural Public Safety Officer (RPSO). It was allowable in statute to promote an officer who already lived in a rural community to a higher level. The individual would then attend the trooper academy and if they succeeded, the trooper position in the rural community would be backfilled. The program faded away because it was not successful, however the department thought the program had potential for the VPSO program. He explained that DPS was attempting to include intent language in its budget request to ensure the legality of the process. If successful, the individuals could work around the state, be armed, and supervise VPSOs. The individuals would be above sergeant level and would have a higher level of training and responsibility. The department was looking at a variety of avenues, including hiring a VPSO at a lower level and recruiting individuals who had recently graduated from high school.

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Representative Coulombe thanked the presenters for their time, particularly during the subcommittee process. She wanted to ensure that the committee knew that there was a substantial budget request for improved information systems due to the costs of implementing the body camera program. She was supportive of the funding for the cameras and the informational systems that were required to support the program. She asked for Mr. Cockrell to speak on the vacancy rate of the wildlife troopers.

Mr. Cockrell noted it had changed since the last time he and Representative Coulombe had last spoken and there was an updated number.

Ms. Halloran responded that the Legislative Finance Division (LFD) pulled the vacancy numbers for the entire component, which she would share. For the AST detachments,

which was where the majority of the troopers resided, the vacancy rate was 11 percent. The wildlife troopers had a vacancy rate of 10 percent.

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Representative Galvin commented that Mr. Cockrell offered her an encouraging view of the future in an earlier meeting in her office. She understood that Mr. Cockrell would like to double VPSO numbers and more than double trooper numbers to ensure that every Alaskan had access to a VPSO. She asked about the requested addition of five full-time permanent positions and wondered if more should be added.

Mr. Cockrell responded that the department had increased trooper numbers but had not yet reached its goal. The department was currently authorized for 328 trooper positions and his goal was to get trooper numbers up 415. The department was beginning an academy at the end of the month and he was not certain of the number of recruits yet, but he reported that the academy numbers in the prior year were promising.

Representative Galvin asked if there were certain areas of Alaska that were more challenging for which to find law enforcement coverage. She had heard about a village near the border of Canada with no law enforcement coverage in which the citizens would follow every car that entered the village to determine whether the visitors were drug dealers. She asked how equal distribution of law enforcement coverage was determined.

Mr. Cockrell responded that the most important component was to look at the crime rates in a given area. For example, the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta (YK Delta) still needed additional troopers and VPSOs. There were over 300 sexual assaults in the YK Delta in the prior year which was by far the highest number apart from Anchorage. Public safety officers in the villages north of Fairbanks had reported to him that they were struggling with drugs in the communities and had purchased a drug dog for the VPSOs. Meth was a huge problem in the area. He noted that the situation in Toguiak was the same and it was an area of concern. Despite its problems, he thought that Alaska was still the greatest state in the nation and had the capacity for incredible success. He thought troopers were set apart from other public safety agencies because of the positive way the

troopers treated the citizens of the state. He added that there were many other duties for which troopers were responsible, such as the registering sex offenders which was a difficult position to fill. He was proud of the troopers and thought they had significant responsibilities beyond law enforcement. The uniform held prestige in the state and he was proud to wear it.

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Representative Tomaszewski commended the presenters for taking on a difficult job. He was glad to hear that Mr. Cockrell had pride in the trooper uniform. He asked how many communities in the state were slated to have a VPSO presence.

Mr. Cockrell responded that he did not have an exact number with him. However, most communities he had visited either wanted to be assigned a trooper or a VPSO offer. He offered to follow up with the total number of communities served.

Representative Tomaszewski asked for confirmation that Mr. Cockrell did not have a total number of communities served.

Mr. Cockrell responded that if the department could hire a trooper or VPSO, most communities would accept the officer. He relayed that there were 329 [228] recognized tribes in the state and most wanted some form of law enforcement. The program continued to grow. He had a future goal to assign VPSOs to international airports in order to crack down on sex trafficking. He thought airports could be a vulnerable environment.

Co-Chair Edgmon echoed Representative Tomaszewski's comments and appreciated the work of the presenters. In the prior year, when SB 81 was signed into law it gave VPSOs higher standing, increased pay, and better housing options. He thanked Mr. Cockrell for meeting with him and Senator Lyman Hoffman regarding the issue of gill netters in Bristol Bay. He reiterated his gratitude for Mr. Cockrell's help on the issues.

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Co-Chair Johnson thanked the troopers for their work. She understood that the troopers were both the first line of defense for crimes and the first social service responders.

She recognized that the troopers were trained at a higher level than any other law enforcement agency in the country.

Co-Chair Johnson reviewed the agenda for the following day's meeting.

HB 39 was HEARD and HELD in committee for further consideration.

HB 41 was HEARD and HELD in committee for further consideration.

#

ADJOURNMENT

[2:54:07 PM](#)

The meeting was adjourned at 2:54 p.m.