

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

April 29, 2025

8:05 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Maxine Dibert, Chair
Representative Robyn Niayuq Burke
Representative Andi Story
Representative Jubilee Underwood
Representative Elexie Moore
Representative Rebecca Schwanke

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative Ashley Carrick

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION: ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY- RURAL PUBLIC SAFETY AND UPDATES ON THE PASSAGE OF SB 151

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

JAMES COCKRELL, Commissioner
Department of Public Safety
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented a PowerPoint, titled "Department of Public Safety's Commitment to Alaskans."

JAMES HOELSCHER, Director
Village Public Safety Operations Division
Department of Public Safety
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Discussed law enforcement training concerning missing and murdered Indigenous persons.

LAUREL SHOOP, Legislative Liaison, Special Assistant to the Commissioner
Office of the Commissioner

Department of Public Safety
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Made brief comments on the presentation.

ACTION NARRATIVE

8:05:08 AM

CHAIR DIBERT called the House Special Committee on Tribal Affairs meeting to order at 8:05 a.m. Representatives Moore, Schwanke, and Dibert were present at the call to order. Representatives Underwood, Story and Burke arrived as the meeting was in progress.

^PRESENTATION: Alaska Department of Public Safety- Rural Public Safety and Updates on the Passage of SB 151

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8:06:03 AM

CHAIR DIBERT announced that the only order of business would be a presentation by the Department of Public Safety- Rural Public Safety and updates on Senate Bill 151 [passed during the Thirty-Third Alaska State Legislature].

8:07:42 AM

JAMES COCKRELL, Commissioner, Department of Public Safety (DPS), presented a PowerPoint, titled "Department of Public Safety's Commitment to Rural Alaskans" [hard copy included in the committee packet]. He expressed pride that DPS has been focused on improving law enforcement in rural Alaska, and he expressed appreciation for the support the legislature has given. He pointed out that the governor has not denied any budget requests for the department in the last four years. He discussed how the Alaska State Trooper presence in rural Alaska has weakened; however, he pointed out that DPS is still committed to these communities. On slide 2, he stated that the Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) program has grown over the past four years, with an increased number of officers, higher salaries, and a higher retention rate. He stated that the department's goal is to fill all requests for VPSOs in the villages. To strengthen the department's focus on the program, he stated that the program is now under the commissioner's office. He pointed out that now there is a dedicated VPSO academy, with a higher

level of training. He referred to a VPSO as "a jack of all trades," as they do more than law enforcement.

[8:15:23 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL, in response to a question from Representative Story, stated that if a community does not have local law enforcement, then the nearest troopers would respond to the emergency and fly to the community; however, he noted that there could be weather delays. He explained that villages have Village Police Officers (VPOs) funded by the federal government, while others have tribal police.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL, in response to a question from Representative Schwanke, stated that some VPSOs stay in the communities where they were born, while others travel to work in other villages across the state. He suggested that there has been more movement recently among these officers, as it is difficult when relatives are in the community, and there is a certain amount of "burnout." He pointed out that most VPSOs are hired by a grantee who funds the position; therefore, they are not state employees.

[8:19:52 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL moved to slide 3, pointing out that DPS has established criminal investigators in rural areas of the state. He explained that adding highly trained troopers for serious crimes has provided equality for rural communities, as they have lacked the resources of more urban areas. He noted the new investigative unit in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, explaining that it focuses on crimes against children and adult sexual assault. He stated that currently there are three investigators, with a request to add three more in the Nome-Kotzebue region. He stated that having these investigators has helped, as prosecutions have risen. He added that this has freed-up the uniform troopers, as they need to be present in the villages. He discussed the modernization of DPS's aircraft fleet, which has helped with response times to emergencies in remote Alaska. He emphasized DPS's focus on solving homicides in remote Alaska.

[8:26:05 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL, in response to a question from Representative Schwanke, clarified that all Native Alaska homicide cases over the last two years have been solved. In

response to a follow-up question, he stated that the Child Advocacy Centers (CACs) are needed for criminal investigations for child sexual assault cases. He discussed the funding issues for these centers, expressing the opinion that CACs need to be funded by the state. He said, "It is almost insulting that we are not funding them." He pointed out that CACs are not part of DPS; however, if the department had the funding, it would fund the centers.

REPRESENTATIVE SCHWANKE expressed support for funding CACs. She pointed out federal grants are tapering off, and there has been discussion in the legislature to find the funding. She emphasized that CACs are an important law enforcement tool, as it allows prosecutions to move forward. She thanked Commissioner Cockrell for his dedication to the issue.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL concurred with Representative Schwanke's comments concerning CACs funding. He argued that federal funding is too unstable, as departments' need continuity for planning. He surmised that the successes at DPS have been because of focus and continuity. He asserted that when a victimized individual has not received support, it is difficult for this individual to become a productive part of society. He reiterated that the state has an obligation to protect its people. He argued that not providing treatment and support to victims would cost society more than the cost of treatment.

REPRESENTATIVE SCHWANKE commented that CACs also provide education to the public, and they have a presence in schools.

[8:35:04 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL, in response to a question from Chair Dibert, clarified that sexual assault cases are not technically a law enforcement issue. He stated that DPS would respond; however, this is a social issue that needs to be systemically solved by the state. He noted that Alaska has had the highest levels of sexual assault and domestic violence for years, and he expressed the opinion there needs to be a shift, as this issue should not always fall on law enforcement. Concerning the question of whether Fairbanks has the only CAC in the Northern Interior, he responded that DPS would fly victims of sexual assault to the nearest CAC for investigation, especially the child victims. He noted that this has been done often.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL, in response to a follow-up question from Representative Burke concerning delays for victims who must be

flown, stated that if a victim on the North Slope cannot go nonstop to Fairbanks, he/she would be diverted to Anchorage. He stated that he would follow up to the committee on procedure when there are no direct flights from Utqiagvik to Fairbanks. He noted that CVDSA stands for the Council on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault.

[8:40:19 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL, on slide 4, stated that when he became commissioner, DPS was not focused on missing and murdered Indigenous persons (MMIP), but over the past four years, it has become a priority. He acknowledged that initially he had underestimated the issue. He stated that after an initiative from the governor, he was able to increase the number of investigators assigned to MMIP cases from two to four. He pointed out these investigators are now working on cold cases.

[8:43:55 AM](#)

JAMES HOELSCHER, Director, Village Public Safety Operations Division, Department of Public Safety, stated that one element of Senate Bill 151 requires that all law enforcement officers have training on cultural understanding and MMIP awareness. He stated that this focus reflects DPS's commitment to strengthening public safety in the villages, building community trust, and honoring the cultures of all the people that the department is sworn to serve. He stated that the training addresses multiple factors concerning historical trauma and MMIP. He pointed out that some of these factors include environmental, domestic violence, sexual assault, trafficking, and substance abuse. He further discussed aspects of the training, such as teaching officers to communicate in cultural ways, so long-term trust could be built with Native communities.

MR. HOELSCHER explained the timeline of the training program, as required by Senate Bill 151. He pointed out that DPS had started the training sessions several months before the required date. He listed the different law enforcement entities included in the training program. He spoke about the development of an online course to facilitate the training. He noted the goal of completing the training requirements before the January 2027 statutory deadline. He stated that DPS is partnering with Native groups and MMIP advocates, and from these partnerships training materials have been updated with local input. He pointed out the goal of creating trust with Indigenous populations across the state.

MR. HOELSCHER discussed the Don't Wait Campaign, which has the goal of dispelling the myth that a person should wait 24 hours before reporting a missing person. He stated that advertisements have been put out to address this misconception. He added that the department is also publishing a form to help structure information related to cases of missing persons. He discussed the strategies in place to help the public use the form. To address environmental factors that contribute to missing persons, he noted that the department is recommending the use of GPS tracking devices. In conclusion, he stated that this and other proactive steps are being taken to address MMIP.

[8:52:15 AM](#)

MR. HOELSCHER, in response to a question from Representative Schwanke, affirmed that VPSOs have been encouraged to educate the community and students on the use of GPS devices. He added that VPSOs also teach in schools about drug awareness and trip-planning safety.

REPRESENTATIVE SCHWANKE expressed support for VPSOs to engage with communities and have their presence in schools, as this builds trust. She expressed the understanding that this would be "breaking down the barriers."

CHAIR DIBERT related a story concerning the importance of informing others and carrying the appropriate equipment when going into the remote wilderness.

[8:57:27 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL acknowledged that Mr. Hoelscher's dedication has helped grow the VSP0 program in a positive direction, and this has been done at a speed not seen in the past.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL moved to slide 5 and discussed the statewide data that DPS has collected on MMIP. He stated that there are about 345 MMIP cases in the database, with 77 percent of these being from environmental reasons, such as a plane crash or a sunken boat. He noted that only 5 percent of MMIP cases are suspicious in nature, and these cases are the focus of the four investigators. He moved to slide 6 and discussed the outreach DPS is doing in the villages. He noted that DPS has hired two tribal liaisons, and department representatives have been attending community meetings, listening sessions, townhall

meetings, and public safety summits. He noted DPS's participation with the Alaska Federation of Natives.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL discussed AKtips, which is a phone app that allows individuals to submit anonymous tips to the troopers concerning illicit drugs. He pointed out that this has helped to understand the flow of drugs into communities and pinpoint the main dealers. He noted that these drug investigators are located throughout rural Alaska. He added that most of these drugs have been seized out of the Anchorage region, as this is where most of them flow through. He pointed out that recently 50 pounds of illicit drugs, such as cocaine, fentanyl, and methamphetamine, were seized in Anchorage. He emphasized that this is considered a large amount. He expressed the understanding that Alaska has a significant drug problem.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL expressed the opinion that DPS has not done "a very good job at connecting with victims of violent crime," and often they are lost in the criminal justice system, as it could take years for a case to go to trial. To address this, he said that a victim navigator program has been set up to help victims stay engaged in the system. He expressed the hope that this would help victims understand that "law enforcement does care."

[9:09:21 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL, in response to a question from Representative Underwood, stated that the Missing Persons Clearinghouse is updated almost daily, and this is available to the public. He stated that the Missing Persons Clearinghouse designates whether the case is environmental, suspicious, or nonsuspicious. He added that there are a few cases where people do not want to be found, but they are still on the list.

[9:11:22 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL, in response to a question from Representative Burke, explained that the categorization of cases as environmental, suspicious, or nonsuspicious would be determined by police reports and discussions with the other law enforcement entities involved. In response to a follow-up question, he clarified that there are no open MMIP cases within DPS. In response to a follow-up question from Chair Dibert, he explained that after a person has been reported missing, the department would start gathering as much information as possible, and an investigation would be opened. He stated that

the circumstances would decide if search and rescue is needed, or if it is a case where someone simply left. He noted that there are also mental health cases. He emphasized that the faster information is provided, the better chance there is of resolving the case.

9:17:08 AM

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL, in response to a question from Representative Schwanke concerning jurisdiction, stated that local police departments are required to contact DPS with cases involving a missing person, and this is so the case could be added to the Missing Persons Clearinghouse list. He explained that the Alaska State Troopers have authority across the entire state except in Denali National Park. He noted that it has concurrent jurisdiction in Metlakatla, as this is the only reservation in the state.

9:19:47 AM

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL, in response to a question from Chair Dibert, stated that VPSOs are trained in search and rescue. He added that VPSOs only have authority within their designated region, but DPS can extend this power to do search and rescue in other areas. He added that DPS has given VPSOs authority under a special commission to have powers within their own region of the state.

9:23:25 AM

REPRESENTATIVE BURKE discussed the situation with VPSOs in the region surrounding the North Slope Borough, as some of these communities do not have law enforcement officers. She stated that many of these communities have expressed a need for law enforcement. She provided a story of a citizen who had to respond to a suicide case, and the individual had no training.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL affirmed that communities without VPOs or VPSOs usually have elders who respond to cases until law enforcement can arrive. He expressed the opinion that the state has failed its citizens for decades, and many people have died. He emphasized the need for improvement, noting that housing for troopers is an issue. He pointed out that even with the progress over the past four years, "we just have a long way to go." He said, "I don't have a good answer for it. I just think it is shameful." He further discussed the struggle of funding

for law enforcement and the VPSO program. He asserted that a solution must be found because people are suffering.

[9:32:38 AM](#)

CHAIR DIBERT commented on a missing person in Fairbanks, and she expressed the opinion that when a family member is missing, a "grey area" is created, and this "opens the door" to a loss of trust in the system, as voices are not being heard. She expressed appreciation to the commissioner, especially for the cultural acknowledgments he made.

[9:34:24 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE SCHWANKE expressed appreciation for the positive statements about progress that has been made. She requested that a one-page information sheet on the AKtips app be sent to every member of the legislature. She opined that putting this out to the public would make DPS's job easier, especially concerning illicit drugs.

COMMISSIONER COCKRELL emphasized that the AKtips app does not take the place of "911." He expressed appreciation to the committee. He noted the gravity of the issues that have been discussed.

CHAIR DIBERT expressed thanks to Commissioner Cockrell for presenting.

[9:38:45 AM](#)

LAUREL SHOOP, Legislative Liaison, Special Assistant to the Commissioner, Office of the Commissioner, Department of Public Safety, reiterated that the need to wait 24 hours before reporting a missing person is a myth. She stated that she would follow up with the AKtips information sheet, and she encouraged that it be shared.

[9:39:29 AM](#)

CHAIR DIBERT urged the members to participate in events to show support for MMIP. She concluded the meeting with closing comments.

[9:40:53 AM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Special Committee on Tribal Affairs meeting was adjourned at 9:41 a.m.