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ALASKA STATE SENATE VPSO TASK FORCE

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February 1, 2008

To: Senate President Lyda Green

From: Senator Donald C. Olson, Chair, VPSO Task Force

Re: Final Report to the Senate

Attached please find the VPSO Task Force's Report to the Senate as required by Senate Resolve 6. The report is also on the web, <http://www.aksenate.org/?vpsa=view>, along with the testimony from hearings that were held or submitted in writing, and other information regarding this Task Force.

On behalf of all the members of the Task Force, I want to thank you for providing us with the opportunity to examine this important issue over the interim.

Cc: Senate Secretary
Members of the Alaska State Senate
Members of the Alaska House of Representatives
The Honorable Sarah Palin
Karen Rehfeld, Director, Office of Management and Budget
Richard Krause, VPSO Coordinator, APIA
Alvin Jimmie, VPSO Coordinator, AVCP
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Alaska State Senate
Village Public Safety Officers (VPSO) Task Force
Report to the Senate

Issued
February 1, 2008

Senate Village Public Safety Officers (VPSO) Task Force Report to the Senate

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**Senate Village Public Safety Officers (VPSO) Task Force
Report to the Senate**

Senate VPSO Task Force Members

Senator Donald C. Olson, Chair

Senator Hollis French

Senator Fred Dyson

Commissioner Walt Monegan, Department of Public Safety

Attorney General (AG) Talis Colberg, Department of Law

Public Member Loretta Bullard, President, Kawerak, Inc.

Public Member Myron Naneng, President, Association of Village Council
Presidents (AVCP)

Committee Aide: Denise Liccioli, staff to Senator Olson

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Authority and Direction

The Senate VPSO Task Force was established by Senate Resolve No. 6 in the first session of the Twenty-fifth Alaska State Legislature. The Senate VPSO Task Force was created to find ways to strengthen and improve public safety in rural Alaska by identifying problems with the VPSO program, and ways those problems might be addressed.

The Senate VPSO Task Force was directed to consider whether statutory changes are necessary or desirable and to submit a report of its findings and recommendations to the Senate by February 15, 2008, after which it is terminated.

Senate Resolve No. 6 is shown as Appendix 1. The statutes governing the VPSO program, AS 18.65.670 and AS 18.65.680, are brief and are shown as Appendix 2.

Methodology

The Senate VPSO Task Force met during September, October, and November in Nome, Savoonga, Gambell, Bethel, Mountain Village, Emmonak, and Kodiak to take public testimony on this important issue. Over 100 people testified during these meetings. The Senate VPSO Task Force also accepted written testimony in addition to testimony given at the hearings.

The Task Force asked testifiers to state their problems or concerns about the program and to concentrate on their recommendations and ideas for restructuring and improvements that would make the program more effective. The Task Force received many recommendations; a full list of recommendations made can be found as Appendix 3.

Following the public meetings where testimony was accepted, the Task Force met in public work sessions in Anchorage and Juneau during November and January to decide on its recommendations and report contents, which ultimately resulted in this report.

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History of the VPSO Program

One of the best documents describing a brief history of the program was provided by Loretta Bullard, one of the public members of the Task Force. Following is that document; the original source of the document is unknown.

"The VPSO program was a response to problems with the training, turnover, and performance of the village police officer program in the 1970s.¹ It was based largely on the idea that law enforcement ought to be 'home-grown' rather than imposed, should encourage local initiative and participation, should incorporate local traditions, and should include elements of social work and public safety.² It combined responsibility for law enforcement, firefighting, search and rescue, water safety, and emergency medical into one position.³ And, as local employees under the direct control of village councils, it intended for VPSOs to be 'responsive to community needs and priorities.'⁴

James Messick and William Nix, two of the principal designers of the VPSO program, wanted villages to have control over the program. They believed that the imposed Western legal system was ineffective and was not supported by local people. However, they thought that villages lacked the organizational capacity to run the program. Therefore, they gave control of the management of the program to the regional native non-profits.⁵ The State Troopers were to serve as technical providers but not tell the VPSOs what to do. And 'the day to day control of the VPSOs ought to come from the city' or the village, increasing 'local control and self-determination at the village level.'⁶

Training was designed to be more extensive and relevant to rural needs and included follow-up training and supervision in the field by oversight Troopers specifically assigned to the program. A steady and sufficient income was intended to help reduce turn-over. In addition, the program represented 'a long term career ladder for the rural, often native individual to enter into the public safety field.'⁷

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Funding level and numbers of officers:

In 1979, a small pilot program was launched with an original request for \$500,000.⁸ However, when the legislature received the request, it increased the project's funding to over \$2.9 million, supporting 52 VPSO positions.⁹ And by FY 1982, the program had grown to 108 VPSO positions and 7 oversight officers, costing \$6,729,700 per year.¹⁰

The program grew through the 1980s and 1990s. In FY 1990, the VPSO program supported 125 positions in 123 villages with a budget of \$6.5 million.¹¹ And by FY 2002, the program had a budget of \$9.1 million.¹² However, the program was cut in FY 2004 to \$5.8 million.¹³

Initial Response from the Troopers:

When the VPSO program was first created, the Troopers resisted the program 'as it seemed to take away some of their authority and (possibly) cut into their budget and offended their sense of professional law enforcement.'¹⁴ Commissioner Nix had to 'read them the riot act,' and threatened to move the program into another division and take away their control over the program.¹⁵

Qualifications:

The Alaska Police Standards Council was advised by the Attorney General's office in 1982 that VPSOs were not considered police officers unless they worked in a 'second class' city for a municipal police department.¹⁶ The certification process then shifted to being part of the contractual arrangement with the regional non-profits.¹⁷

One of the biggest problems with qualifications was the prohibition on hiring officers with arrest records. For example, in 1981 eighteen of the twenty six applicants for the VPSO program had arrest records.¹⁸ Commissioner Nix thought it was inappropriate to view arrest records as a barometer of moral character in rural communities. Instead, he thought the decision should rest with the residents of the villages themselves.¹⁹

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Program Operation:

In 1989, the program operated similarly to the way it operates today. The native nonprofit in each region contracted with the State to manage the VPSO program. The villages in each region appealed to their nonprofit for a VPSO, and the nonprofit allocated VPSOs based on available funding.²⁰ VPSOs were hired and fired by the nonprofit in close consultation with the village councils and the Troopers.²¹

Supervision by the Troopers:

Supervision for VPSOs in the 1980s was managed by oversight troopers in the regional hubs. In 1987, there were 5 oversight officers for 116 VPSOs.²² It was their responsibility to check the work of the VPSOs, contact them by phone at least once a week, visit them in the field at least every two months, conduct in-field training, follow up on actions taken by the VPSOs, check their notebooks and records, ensure that VPSOs submit their bi-weekly reports on time, arrange for external training and travel, maintain contact with village council members, approve the hiring by VPSOs of emergency guards to hold detained or arrested suspects, and submit personnel evaluation forms on their VPSOs and a monthly recap record of their own activities.²³

VPSO training:

In the 1980s, new VPSO recruits attended a six week course at the Trooper Academy in Sitka. They received 60 hours of EMT training, 90 hours of firefighting training, and instructions on water safety, search and rescue, and how to organize a volunteer fire department.²⁴ They received no training in firearms. And every year, they were required to return for a one-week training course at the Academy.²⁵

Snapshot – TCC 1989:

In 1989, salaries for VPSOs in the Tanana Chiefs Conference region ranged from \$21,612 to \$28,080 per year.²⁶ There were 18 VPSOs and 6 VPSOs in the 42 villages in the region along with 6 State Troopers stationed permanently in the region.²⁷

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The FY 2008 budget for the VPSO program is \$5.4 million. There are 51 VPSO positions authorized, but there is a very high turnover rate ranging from 30% to 48%, over the last 6 years for which data exists.

The current starting salary, without overtime or pay incentives, for a VPSO is \$16.55 per hour, or \$32,273 per year, based on a 37.5 hour work week.

¹ "The Village Public Safety Officer Program: A Conceptual Design to Improve Law Enforcement and Public Safety in the Rural Areas of Alaska," Department of Public Safety, Commissioner William R. Nix, 1980; "Innovation in Policing: Bureaucratic Entrepreneurship in the Development of the Village Public Safety Officer Program in Alaska," Otwin Marenin, 1989, p. 11-12.

² "Innovation in Policing" at p. 13.

³ Id.

⁴ "The Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) Program in Rural Alaska: Trends and Prospects," Otwin Marenin, 1989, p. 25

⁵ "Innovation in Policing," at 17.

⁶ "The Village Public Safety Officer Program: A Conceptual Design to Improve Law Enforcement and Public Safety in the Rural Areas of Alaska," Department of Public Safety, Commissioner William R. Nix, 1980, p. 4, 11; "Innovation in Policing," at 17.

⁷ "Innovation in Policing," at 13.

⁸ "The VPSO Program, Concept, History and Operation," State of Alaska, undated, p. 5.

⁹ Id.

¹⁰ Id.

¹¹ Id; "The Village Public Safety Officer Program: Providing Public Safety Services to Rural Alaska," Patrick Jolley, 1990, p. 48; "The VPSO Program," Marenin, p. 25.

¹² "VPSO Comparison Gov Request to Authorized FY 83 to FY 05," State of Alaska, Department of Public Safety, 2004.

¹³ Id.

¹⁴ "The VPSO Program," Marenin, at 18.

¹⁵ Id.

¹⁶ "Innovation in Policing, Marenin, p. 18.

¹⁷ Id.

¹⁸ Id.

¹⁹ Id. at 19.

²⁰ "The VPSO Program," Marenin, p. 26.

²¹ Id. at 26.

²² Id. at 27.

²³ Id. at 27.

²⁴ Id. at 27.

²⁵ Id. at 27.

²⁶ Id. at 26.

²⁷ Id. at 26.

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Findings and Issues

The main findings are not new, and are essentially the same concerns that existed and were behind the creation of the program about 30 years ago. The Task Force members heard from many testifiers that there have been many other studies and reports written over the years, each expressing the same or very similar concerns, yet nothing changes. Overall, there is a feeling of inequity, whether perceived or real, when comparing public safety provided to urban residents of the State of Alaska to public safety provided to the rural residents of the State. The lack of visible change from any of the previous reports or studies contributes to this feeling since it is seen as meaning that the rural residents are not important enough to be worth the time and money it might take to make some of the changes.

The Task Force repeatedly heard that the residents of rural Alaska want to be treated fairly, and are as deserving of and entitled to protection, peace, and dignity as the residents of our state who happen to live in an urban area. They point to several things to support those comments, including the area/number of miles covered by a VPSO compared to a Trooper; the respect and support given to a Trooper compared to a VPSO; pay and other benefits such as retirement and health insurance, and the equipment and facilities provided to VPSOs compared to other law enforcement.

It was for these reasons that the Task Force decided to concentrate its recommendations to things that could be implemented over the short run to show good faith and progress; and to limit the recommendations to a small number to ensure clear direction for needed improvements.

The main areas for the findings revolved around five main issues:

- Recruitment and retention. No matter how much money or how many positions are authorized, public safety cannot be strong until we can get and keep good people in the positions that are authorized. Recruitment often results in no acceptable applicants; and once filled, these positions turn over frequently. Some of the reasons given were:

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- Too much stress and not enough down time or counseling when faced with traumatic events and/or long hours or days in a row
- There are not enough VPSOs, no backup, need more than one in many locations
- Pay too low, can make more elsewhere
- Not enough benefits or housing, no future
- Do not like arresting family and friends
- Not enough equipment or adequate facilities to do the job, need to use their own, buy their own.
- Sometimes a good candidate cannot be considered due to having a police record from something they did a long time ago when they were younger; have since reformed, but not given the chance.

Other ideas discussed involved whether or not VPSOs should become state employees, and whether or not there should be tiers within the VPSOs to recognize differences in what is asked of each VPSO, and the different training, background and longevity each might have. The concept of becoming state employees seemed to have cautious support in most areas with the exception of the Tanana and AVCP areas. Admittedly, each of the options would help with advancement opportunities. Becoming state employees would help with the benefit package, equipment and facilities, and backup and support. The concerns expressed regarding becoming state employees were mostly related to loss of control over the hires and over the program itself. There was a strong feeling that VPSOs need to come from the rural parts of the state, with an understanding of the culture in the village.

The Task Force frequently heard the need for more VPSOs. Not only in additional communities, but also for multiple VPSOs in a single location, and for a possible itinerant cadre of VPSOs to go from village to village, to assist with backup and for those times when more than 1 VPSO is needed.

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It is clear that criteria needs to be established, or if already established, then reconsidered for which communities should have a VPSO and how many. Criteria that needs to be included:

- The size of the community
- Proximity to troopers
- Proximity to other villages
- Support and commitment of the community
- Amount and level of crime/dysfunction in that community
- VPSOs should be allowed whether the community is on or off the road system

In many cases, people who are capable and currently good citizens cannot qualify to become a VPSO because of a criminal record. Too often, people do things when they are young that they regret and that they would not do as an adult. Or sometimes a person may have an isolated instance of doing something stupid that is shown as being just that, and it might have happened a long time ago. People do change, especially if the mistake was made when they were young, and/or it was an isolated occurrence rather than a pattern of behavior. There needs to be a way of pardoning past crimes in some cases so that people who are now on the right path qualify to become a VPSO. With the difficulty in finding VPSOs and with the high rate of suicide among youth especially, this change if done carefully could make a big difference.

- Governance and policies. There is a real need for a short and long term plan. The writing of a 5-10-20 year plan is needed and would best be done as a collaborative effort by the regional non-profits and DPS.

The expectations of the VPSOs, as well as for contract management, reports, training, and other areas needs to be better defined, and communicated to all.

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If VPSOs remain as contract employees rather than becoming state employees, there needs to be better grant management between the Department of Public Safety and the regional non-profit that holds the contract. There also needs to be provision in the contract to cover CPI increases to salaries and the other costs of running the program.

If VPSOs do become state employees, they need to be hired at the regional/local level. Current VPSOs would also like to be given credit for time already served.

The community support really needs to be strengthened. The example was given of what happens when a search and rescue is needed: the whole village comes together to help and take responsibility. Yet when it comes to the other things that affect public safety in the village, the support of the community is not always there. It was clear from the testimony from VPSOs that they really need the support and respect of their community.

Some ideas expressed that would help strengthen community support:

- Promote VPSOs as a respectable career choice
- Perhaps create an ad campaign for VPSOs similar to what is done for Troopers
- Provide assertiveness training to locals so they will be able to confront those who are known in the community to have drug/alcohol problems
- Form Village Public Safety Committees to deal with:
 - Fires
 - Search and rescue
 - Citizen patrols
 - Community policing
 - Neighborhood watch
 - Eyes and ears of the VPSO or other law enforcement in the community
 - Backup and assistance to the VPSO, VPO, TPO

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An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure is how the saying goes, and this is very true of law enforcement in rural Alaska as well. For example, better lighting would help. Sometimes it is simple human nature that fear of being seen is a strong motivator for not doing things one should not do. Education programs and teen centers or other activities that would provide something for the residents to do would also help to keep things positive and provide something to do other than get in trouble, especially for the youth in the villages.

Many people expressed their respect and belief in the power of some type of Elders program, too. Particularly when working with youth, and being able to "nip things in the bud" before small troubles become big. The elders in the community are more concerned with teaching the youth their boundaries, rather than finding a way to punish. It could be an effective way of turning youth around and putting them on track, teaching them respect for themselves and others, as well as keeping some of them "out of the system".

- Responsibilities and training. A VPSO Academy is usually held once each year and individuals hired as VPSOs (who have not previously attended the academy) attend and receive extensive, structured training in public safety. This training is about 602 hours as compared to AST and Municipal Police Officers, who receive 896 hours of training. An annual regional training is also organized for continuing VPSOs; it is 40 hours and generally held in one of the regional hubs around the State, with VPSOs from other regions participating. VPSOs also have the opportunity to apply for and be selected to attend other training opportunities, such as DARE training, REID interview and interrogation preparation, and Street Survival classes.

Although VPSOs receive extensive training at the VPSO Academy, they expressed the need for additional training in such

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areas as search and rescue and stress management, in addition to their day to day situations and questions and answers.

They need regular, onsite, visits by the Trooper assigned to the area. The Troopers need to be trained in the culture and ways of the village, too.

Sometimes it is the VPO that needs training and/or direction, which could perhaps be provided by the VPSO. This would help to strengthen their standing, as well as another way of having trained backup that is sometimes needed.

The VPSOs would also like to be trained on youth prevention programs, so they can do things like the DARE program in the schools. This could be a dual advantage not only by the prevention of crime, but also by escalating how VPSOs are viewed in the community.

- Program Funding. Funding is definitely an issue. It would take a lot of money to do everything that is requested. Some of the fixes will only be able to happen if additional funding comes from the State. If we are to have more VPSOs and pay them more to attract and retain good candidates, it will come with a price tag.

In addition, CPI increases to the salary of VPSOs need to be programmed in on an annual basis. It is only because of the technicality of being contract employees that this is not done routinely, as it is with state employees. The regions also want more say in what the VPSO is paid in their region to account for differences in cost of living.

CPI increases are also needed to cover things like fuel and utility increases, replacement of uniforms and equipment, etc. This could also be accomplished by including some type of stipend in the contract, or even by increasing revenue sharing in locations that provide support to a VPSO.

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Other ways to tap into more funding would be to partner with other agencies such as the National Guard. Support might also be available from the Denali Commission, HUD, USDA, Alaska Housing, and the regional housing authority. These avenues need to be explored to see what is available that would be of benefit to the program.

Some suggested using the money from forfeitures to pay some of the cost of public safety in rural Alaska. Perhaps establish some type of Rural Public Safety Fund and deposit those funds and other funds into that fund for use in rural areas.

- Support. The frequency and quality of communication with the oversight Trooper needs to be improved. Sometimes the response from the Trooper is slow or too late to be very helpful. The Troopers are also being pulled in different directions, and sometimes see what is happening in their area as being more critical. Other times, it is simply weather that may keep them away. Regardless of the reason, better communication and frequent interaction between the VPSO and oversight Trooper is needed.

There is a critical need for VPSO housing, and adequate facilities and equipment. Some villages do not have any housing for VPSOs; others have housing, but it is substandard. Many villages have public safety facilities that are so poor as to be nonexistent from a practical stand point. The lack of equipment was also frequently voiced as a concern. Many VPSOs use their own snowmobiles, ATVs, etc., and buy their own gas. Due to the geographic challenges that exist in rural Alaska, radios and satellite phones would make a difference.

A possible partnership with the National Guard (NG) would be advantageous from a number of sides. First, the possibility of having NG members become VPSOs would help with having

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trained and capable people hired. Also, many villages have armories that stand idle for most of the year; perhaps these could become dual purpose facilities through some type of partnership. The NG has a lot of equipment available, too, and perhaps a partnership with them could assist with the current lack of equipment available to VPSOs.

Other possible partnerships include the school systems and the technical centers. Perhaps they could develop and offer a course on building and maintenance, and have the students build a facility, or add on to a facility, or do some type of upkeep to facilities. The student would gain experience in construction and credit toward their coursework; and the village would get a facility or improvements to their facility.

There is an urgent need for counseling and some type of Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) program. VPSOs often have to spend all day and night on a tragedy like a search and rescue, then go right back out in very little time, often with little sleep, and be on the job again. Troopers are required to take time off and have counseling when critical incidents occur; the same support should be provided to the VPSOs.

With a list that contains so many important and essential items to public safety, there is clearly more that needs to be done than can reasonably be accomplished in a short time. The Task Force weighed each of the many suggestions including some of their own to narrow down the lengthy list to just a few items. Again, this in no way indicates a lack of importance for anything that did not make it to a recommendation; rather it only indicates the commitment of the Task Force to being able to make some changes immediately.

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Recommendations

After careful consideration of the possible ways that could be employed to strengthen public safety and the VPSO program in rural Alaska, it was difficult to narrow down the recommendations to a short list. Many of the possibilities which are not included as a recommendation are worthy of further consideration. Please refer to Appendix 3.

For the recommendations that follow to be successful, it is incumbent upon DPS to support and collaborate with the regional non-profits in developing plans and implementing changes - to the degree the plans or changes are significant to the program or grant agreements. With them working together, we as a State can honor those elders and others who came before the Task Force to share their thoughts and knowledge on this topic, and to truly have an impact on the public safety in rural Alaska.

Statutory changes are not necessary to achieve any of the recommendations of this Task Force. However, should it be decided at a later date to have VPSOs become state employees, or if the grant management is changed, the appropriate statutes would require changes.

In keeping with the intent of staying focused on only a few items, the VPSO Task Force recommendations are:

Recommendation 1. Increase the base pay to \$21 per hour and program CPI increases into the budget annually.

The current base pay of \$16.55 per hour was consistently voiced as one of the reasons for difficulties in recruiting and retaining VPSOs. Even Transportation Security Officers make a higher starting wage with much less risk in their day to day duties, and much less training required; and they enjoy the backup and other support lacking for VPSOs. Health Aides with no experience or training start at approximately that wage, but once they become credentialed, their wage increases substantially by about \$6.50 per hour. Without exception, every comparable field with duties similar to some part of what VPSOs are required to perform, will earn a higher wage.

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In order to prevent the erosion of the base wage, CPI increases, equal to what the State Troopers receive, need to be budgeted for and DPS should request annual increases in their budget to cover those CPI increases, similar to what is done for State Troopers and other state employees.

Further, the probation and parole adjustment should be available to all VPSOs equally (and in addition to their regular salary).

To clarify, the intention is to increase all steps and ranges of the current salary schedule accordingly -- not just the starting pay -- to maintain the existing parity between those steps and ranges, and afford every VPSO a comparable increase of approximately \$4.50 per hour, whether newly hired or not, with no diminution of any bonus or incentive pay, such as the probation and parole adjustment.

The Task Force estimates the cost to implement the salary increase for VPSOs to be approximately \$713,600 in FY 2009. The cost to implement the CPI increases will vary depending on the specific CPI increase, but as an example, a 3% increase in FY 2010 would cost approximately \$230,000.

Recommendation 2. Increase the number of VPSOs.

The Task Force recognizes that public safety is a basic function of organized communities, and that the state has a role in making certain that there is a minimum level of police protection throughout the state. It is clear by the testimony heard and the experience of some members of the Task Force that there are not enough VPSOs to do an adequate job of providing public protection, and it is one of the most voiced reasons for VPSOs becoming burned out and leaving their position. To ask them to work 24/7 under the stress they face and in many cases without backup, is not reasonable or fair.

Thus the Task Force recommends that every village with a population over 150 have a VPSO; and to address the issue of villages where one VPSO is trying to serve a larger population, the Task Force recommends that every village with a population over 500 have an additional VPSO to provide for adequate coverage. To do so would mean having 115 VPSOs; currently there are 51, so this would necessitate adding another 64 VPSOs.

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Once the 5 and 10 year plan is completed and provided to the Senate next year (see Recommendation number 3), DPS and the regional non-profits will have completed a more thorough review and established additional criteria, not just population, in order to determine how many VPSOs there should be. Lacking that guidance now, the Task Force recommends an increase of 15 positions and related funding per year, over the next 4 years. Adding them incrementally is needed to allow time to absorb the additional positions into the force and to be able to have time to adjust the training and other requirements to handle the increased force.

Once the criteria has been established in the 5 and 10 year plan and it has been presented to the Senate, then the number determined by the regional non-profits and DPS in the 5 and 10 year plan should be used as the target. For the remaining 3 years, the number added should be adjusted from the 15 being recommended now, to the number needed as determined by application of the criteria established in the 5 and 10 year plan over the remaining 3 year period.

The Task Force estimates the cost to implement this, at the increased wage scale from Recommendation Number 1, to be \$1,010,600 in FY 2009, and approximately \$1,100,000 per year for the next three years, which includes a 3% CPI increase each year beginning with FY 2010.

Recommendation 3. DPS and the regional non-profits should work collaboratively to develop and maintain a 5 and 10 year plan for the VPSO program, to include a status of the VPSO program and an update from the impacts of recommendations by this Task Force; and deliver a copy to the Senate by February 1, 2009.

This will be an effective tool for requesting changes to the program, grant, or other terms; and to continue to build on the recommendations in this report, and the testimony heard by the Task Force. It will also allow time to plan for adjustments and to phase in meaningful changes over some type of schedule.

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They should immediately establish criteria for which villages get a VPSO and how many, which will give a more definitive answer to the question of how many VPSOs are needed to provide the rural areas with adequate law enforcement services. The criteria should include:

- The size of the community,
- The proximity to Troopers,
- The proximity to other villages,
- The amount and level of crime and dysfunction, and
- The support and commitment of the community

Whether or not a village is on the road system should NOT be one of the criteria.

At a minimum, other items for consideration and inclusion in the plan are:

- Whether or not VPSOs should have levels; for example, a "VPSO I" could be a trainee, while a "VPSO III" could be the most experienced and/or credentialed VPSO
- Whether salary differentials are needed to recognize cost of living differences between the villages
- Finding ways to increase community support of VPSOs
- Determining ways in which the VPSO image can be elevated
- Whether Village Public Safety Committees should be formed; and if so, the function and tasks for which these committees would be responsible
- How to provide and/or improve on the housing, facilities, and equipment provided to VPSOs in carrying out their duties
- Whether other funding sources, such as the Denali Commission, USDA, AHFC, HUD, etc., can be applied for and used to support the VPSO program in some way

Recommendation 4. The regional non-profits and DPS should develop an organized trauma debriefing program to follow the track of what DPS already does for State Troopers.

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Often, the VPSOs have to deal with and/or clean up after suicides or other incidents that are not only stressful in terms of the time it takes, but the incidents take a toll on the mental health of the VPSO as it would on any other human being. The stress on a VPSO after dealing with a trauma deserves the support and requirement of some type of counseling and/or debriefing program for his/her own health and well being.

There needs to be assurance that action will be taken to reach the VPSO after an incident and advise him/her of what is available, and not simply wait for the VPSO to ask or seek help. DPS can provide transport for the VPSO, with or without the VPSO's family, to where he/she can get help – whether a chaplain, counselor or some other service – or DPS can provide the service at the VPSO's location, on a case by case basis.

DPS has stated they have already started to develop this program and have guaranteed there will be assistance provided to mitigate the VPSO's trauma of dealing with each incident.

The Task Force encourages DPS to rapidly continue the development of this policy and program so it can be implemented ASAP.

Recommendation 5. DPS should provide a small stipend of \$1,000 per VPSO to each community with a VPSO, to assist the community with the cost of their public safety facility; and DPS and the regional non-profits should work collaboratively to pursue partnerships with other agencies to provide and/or improve on the facilities and equipment available.

The condition of the public safety buildings in the villages is deplorable. Please see Appendix 4 for pictures of the Savoonga Public Safety Building taken by Senator French when the Task Force held their hearing there on September 26, 2007.

These partnerships may also encompass other mutual areas of interest, but should certainly look at the possibility of cooperative agreements for the use of facilities and equipment. The Adjutant General of the National Guard (NG) testified such an agreement would be mutually beneficial for

Senate Village Public Safety Officers (VPSO) Task Force Report to the Senate

encouraging the employment of NG members, as well as for the possible use of facilities and equipment. Partnerships with the technical centers around the State should also be pursued, especially in terms of the possible development of a curriculum offered to students in building, expanding, remodeling, and/or maintaining of facilities.

With the increase in VPSOs per Recommendation Number 2 factored in, this recommendation would cost \$66,000 in FY 2009, and an additional \$15,000 per year until FY 2012. Note: this amount will change depending on the actual number of authorized VPSOs.

Recommendation 6. Acceptable housing needs to be provided to VPSOs.

The provision for housing is not required by DPS or by program requirements, but is an option that the non-profits try to use whenever possible as an incentive to recruitment and retention of VPSOs. This recommendation will be a difficult one to implement, yet it is an important one because of the effect on recruitment and retention.

Some villages are able to provide dedicated housing to their VPSO, but the housing is not always acceptable. It may be too small for a family, or it might not be well maintained. Other villages have dedicated housing for a group of jobs, but not specifically for the VPSO. In those cases, the housing may already be in use by one of the other positions. Building additional housing is expensive which makes that option not viable.

The Task Force sent a letter to Alaska's US Senators and another to the Denali Commission and the Alaska Housing Authority requesting help in this area. Copies of the letters are shown in Appendix 5.

The Task Force recommends DPS and the regional non-profits meet with the Denali Commission, the Alaska Associated Housing Authority and any other agencies involved with facilities and housing in rural Alaska to pursue alternative solutions to this major problem.

Senate Village Public Safety Officers (VPSO) Task Force Report to the Senate

Closing remarks

The members of the Task Force want to thank everyone who participated in producing this report, especially those who took the time to testify at the hearings or provide written testimony.

The Task Force recognizes that fulfilling the recommendations in this report will take a large commitment by the regional non-profits, the communities involved, DPS, and the Legislature. The commitment is one not only of time and resolve, but also of funding.

This report, testimony provided and heard at hearings, photos and other data used by the VPSO Task Force can be found on the web at:
<http://www.aksenate.org/?vpso=view>. Or simply go to aksenate.org and select the VPSO Task Force from the menu on the left of the screen.

The VPSO Task Force recommends the Legislature carefully consider the recommendations in this report and take any action necessary to implement these findings and recommendations.

NOTE: The following page contains drawings done by Attorney General Talis Colberg while traveling to Savoonga and Gambell for hearings on September 26, 2007.



SAVONNA, TX 9-20-7



SAVONNA 9-20-7 TX

**Senate Village Public Safety Officers (VPSO) Task Force
Report to the Senate**

Appendix 1

Senate Resolve No. 6

STATE OF ALASKA SENATE

2007

Source
CSSR 7(FIN)

Senate
Resolve No.
6



Creating and relating to the Senate VPSO Task Force.

BE IT RESOLVED BY THE SENATE:

WHEREAS many rural areas of the state, including rural areas located on the road system, depend on village public safety officers for police protection and law enforcement; and

WHEREAS nonprofit regional corporations, coordinating with the state, administer village public safety officer programs; and

WHEREAS it is in the interest of the entire state to ensure that rural areas are provided with adequate law enforcement services;

BE IT RESOLVED that the Senate VPSO Task Force is established in the legislative branch by the senate, consisting of the attorney general or the attorney general's designee, the commissioner of public safety or the commissioner's designee, three senators, and two public members appointed by the president of the senate, who shall also designate one of the senate members to serve as chair; and be it

FURTHER RESOLVED that the public members of the task force may receive per diem and travel expenses authorized for boards and commissions under AS 39.20.180, subject

to available funding and approval by the task force chair; and be it

FURTHER RESOLVED that the task force shall

(1) consider the role of the village public safety officer program and ways in which the program can be improved to better serve rural areas of the state, including areas located on roads;

(2) identify any problems with the village public safety officer program and ways those problems might be addressed;

(3) review statutes and regulations that deal with the village public safety officer program and consider whether statutory changes are necessary or desirable;

(4) prepare and deliver to the senate, by February 15, 2008, a report of the findings and recommendations of the task force; and be it

FURTHER RESOLVED that, subject to available funding, the chair of the task force may hire staff and that the Legislative Affairs Agency shall provide administrative support to the task force as needed; and be it

FURTHER RESOLVED that the Senate VPSO Task Force is terminated on February 15, 2008.

COPIES of this resolution shall be sent to the Honorable Talis J. Colberg, Alaska Attorney General; and the Honorable Walt Monegan, Commissioner, Department of Public Safety.

**Senate Village Public Safety Officers (VPSO) Task Force
Report to the Senate**

Appendix 2

Alaska Statutes 18.65.670 and 18.65.680

Alaska Statutes 18.65.670 and 18.65.680

Page 1 of 2

Sec. 18.65.670. Village public safety officers program.

(a) There is created in the Department of Public Safety a village public safety officer program to assist local governments and villages through nonprofit regional corporations to appoint, train, supervise, and retain persons to serve as village public safety officers to administer functions relative to

(1) the protection of life and property in rural areas of the state; and

(2) providing probation and parole supervision to persons under supervision by communicating with and monitoring the activities and progress of these persons at the direction of probation and parole officers.

(b) With funds appropriated for that purpose, the commissioner of public safety shall provide grants to nonprofit regional corporations for village public safety officers. The commissioner of public safety shall coordinate with the commissioner of corrections when providing grants under this section, and the commissioners shall jointly execute an agreement with the nonprofit regional corporations.

(c) The commissioner of public safety may adopt regulations related to village public safety officers, including minimum standards and training, criteria for community or corporation participation, and the interaction between the Department of Public Safety and village public safety officers. The commissioner of corrections may adopt regulations related to the functions of village public safety officers providing probation and parole supervision.

(d) *[Repealed, Sec. 30 ch 92 SLA 2004].*

Sec. 18.65.680. Regional public safety officers.

The commissioner of public safety may appoint regional public safety officers to

(1) provide an expanded public safety and law enforcement presence in rural areas of the state;

Alaska Statutes 18.65.670 and 18.65.680

Page 2 of 2

- (2) provide oversight and training for the village public safety officer program;
- (3) administer functions relating to
 - (A) protecting life and property in the rural areas of the state;
 - (B) conducting investigations;
 - (C) conducting search and rescue missions;
 - (D) conducting local training programs in drug and alcohol awareness and prevention, water safety, and gun safety;
- (4) perform other duties relating to public safety as directed by the commissioner.

**Senate Village Public Safety Officers (VPSO) Task Force
Report to the Senate**

Appendix 3

List of Suggested Solutions

Senate VPSO Task Force

List of suggested solutions (similar suggestions grouped together)

Prepared by the staff of Senator Donald Olson

page 1 of 6

January 19, 2008

PAY ISSUES

- **Increase VPSO wage**
- **Bump VPSO salary schedule to allow for CPI**
- Recognize cost of living differences
- Perhaps have levels of VPSOs to reflect more training, certification and/or experience, differences in what a VPSO in one village does compared to another
- Salary placement should be left up to regional contractors, not pre-determined by the State
- Lower duties of VPSO or pay what they're worth
- AST=higher paid prisoner transport

BENEFITS

- **Provide medical, dental, retirement benefits**

ADVANCEMENT OPPORTUNITIES

- **VPSOs become State employees** (some regions are opposed to this)
- **Tiered law enforcement**

BACKUP AND WORKLOAD

- **VPSOs need organized trauma debriefing program and counseling**
- **More than 1 VPSO per community**
- **Circulate itinerant cadre of VPSOs amongst villages**
- **Provide backup to VPSO**
- **Hire VPSOs from villages, place in other villages than their own**
- **Place Troopers in villages**
- **Station VPSO/AST in units**

Senate VPSO Task Force

List of suggested solutions (similar suggestions grouped together)

Prepared by the staff of Senator Donald Olson

page 2 of 6

January 19, 2008

- Want teams
- VPSOs serve more than 1 village
- Put more Troopers in the villages

EQUIPMENT

- Provide equipment so they don't have to use their own

HOUSING

- Make housing available – in many cases, none available or is substandard

PUBLIC SAFETY BUILDINGS

- Fix up/renovate Public Safety buildings
- Build prototype housing/jail cell combination facilities

PARTNERSHIPS

- Develop partnerships to access money and to strengthen program
- Pursue contractual relationship with the National Guard to share facilities and equipment; and to promote the hire of NG members as VPSOs.
- Develop partnerships with the technical centers and school systems to have students build/expand facilities as a course offering for credit

STRATEGIC PLANNING AND PROGRAM REVIEW

- Develop 5-10-20 year plan to improve public safety
- Identify roles of tribe-city-state as it relates to law enforcement
- Model VPSO program on Health Aide program
- Provide avenue for waiver of clean background criteria in some cases
- Establish criteria for which villages get a VPSO and how many. Criteria to include:

Senate VPSO Task Force

List of suggested solutions (similar suggestions grouped together)

Prepared by the staff of Senator Donald Olson

page 3 of 6

January 19, 2008

- **Size of community**
- **Proximity to troopers**
- **Proximity to other villages**
- **Support and commitment of community**
- **Amount and level of crime/disfunction**
- **Can be on road system**
- Add to job description – assist ICWA staff when home visits required – serve court orders
- Look at VPSO P/P - amend/waive if need be
- Liaison in regional non-profits – state employee over State VPSOs
- Need to develop/shape law enforcement stats
- Need to include rural Alaskans on justice related boards/issues
- Arm the VPSOs
- When hiring, look at the character of the applicant; need to be strong
- Tribes participate in evaluating VPSO

COMMUNITY SUPPORT

- **Build community support - VPSO need support at their ground level**
- **Need to get whole village involved in providing law and order in village**
- **Promote/hire VPSOs similar to what is done for AST**
- **Form Village Public Safety Committees; include SAR, fire, citizen patrols, community policing, neighborhood watch**
- **Provide assertiveness training to locals to confront alcohol/drug dealers**
- **Give each Tribal Council the option to search/seize alcohol/drugs**

BOLD denotes suggestions that were offered multiple times, or that had strong support even if offered only once

Senate VPSO Task Force

List of suggested solutions (similar suggestions grouped together)

Prepared by the staff of Senator Donald Olson

page 4 of 6

January 19, 2008

- Show VPSO qualifications at career days
- Need to teach respect for law enforcement

TRAINING AND PREVENTION

- **More communication with oversight Troopers**
- **AST needs to spend quality time in village**
- **Train VPSO to do prevention with kids, like DARE training in schools**
- **VPSO provide leadership/direction to VPOs**
- **Provide report writing training**
- Teach kids (3rd/4th grades) about laws, law enforcement respect - put in curriculum
- Cultural sensitivity training for all AST
- VPOs need training! SAR clueless Do training via video conferencing
- Send Trooper in to train VPO – come in once per month to check on them
- Train VPSO/AST to fly planes
- VPOs need training, orientation, ethics, etc confidentiality
- Provide training to VPSOs to help health aides and VBC
- Look at training schedule
- Better prepare VPSOs for academy
- Have native organization provide cultural training to VPSOs
- Improve services in rural Alaska to prevent misbehavior

OTHER MONEY ISSUES

- **Pay O:M/rent to cities for VPSO space**
- **State provide rent/utilities for VPSOs in villages**

BOLD denotes suggestions that were offered multiple times, or that had strong support even if offered only once

Senate VPSO Task Force

List of suggested solutions (similar suggestions grouped together)

Prepared by the staff of Senator Donald Olson

page 5 of 6

January 19, 2008

- **Cover indirect costs fully**
- **Funding is limited to one year at a time which creates problems for things like leave pay outs, etc.**
- **Liability issues**
- **Increase revenue sharing to villages with a VPSO and have them deal with the housing, facility, and equipment issues**
- **Form VPSO endowment fund**
- **Western AK Narco team – direct money to VPSO program**
- **Need money for youth courts in villages**
- **Need money to run Tribal courts**
- **Help fund Elder intervention program in Emmonak**

OTHER SUGGESTIONS

- **More magistrates in villages**
- **Stop drugs/alcohol from getting into villages in the first place**
- **Tribes need to be able to intervene and destroy home brew/drug selling - need search warrants – can't just confiscate**
- **Develop youth Tribal diversion panel for drinking youth – replicate throughout the State to address juvenile delinquent problems**
- **Increase punishment for bootleggers**
- **Need a 911 help line (easy access)**
- **Reinstate cops program**
- **Expand the number of kids who can attend Nat'l Indian Policing Academy**
- **Rural exchange program – village to village**

BOLD denotes suggestions that were offered multiple times, or that had strong support even if offered only once

Senate VPSO Task Force

List of suggested solutions (similar suggestions grouped together)

Prepared by the staff of Senator Donald Olson

page 6 of 6

January 19, 2008

- If convicted of felony, can't carry weapons – need to allow exemption for hunting
- Have bush airlines search all bags
- State get over paranoia over W/W tribes

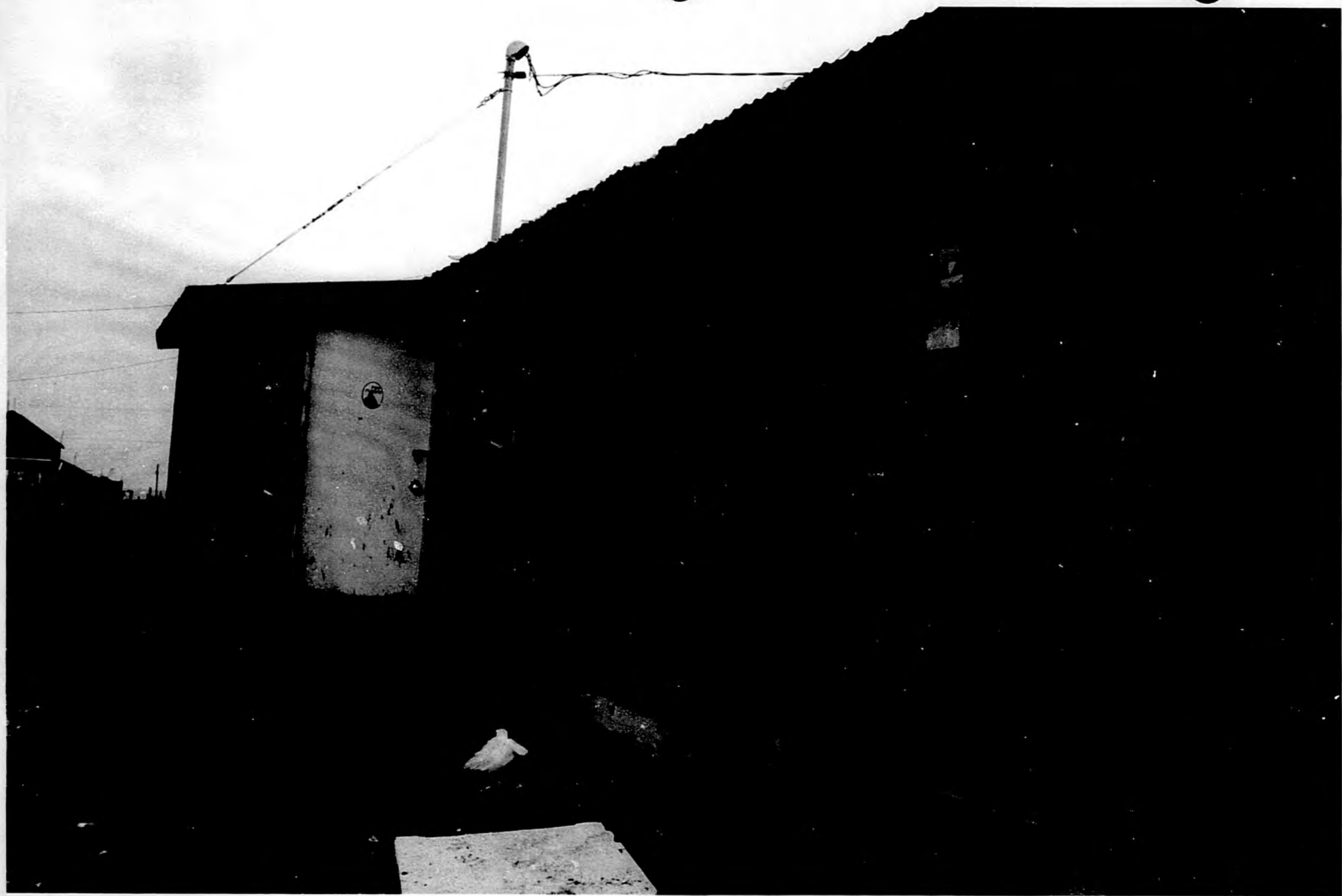
EXAMPLE OF PERSON/VILLAGE WHO TURNED THINGS AROUND

- Abraham – Agathluk VPO example of “turned around”
 - o 5+ years working as a VPO
 - o VPO all time low
 - o Work whole year, get two weeks
 - o Cases stacked up
 - o Only 2 people working
 - o No training
 - o Has more support
 - o Has 2 vehicles
 - o Applicants can't hire – on probation or convicted felon
- Doing good in Bethel stopping drugs/alcohol

**Senate Village Public Safety Officers (VPSO) Task Force
Report to the Senate**

Appendix 4

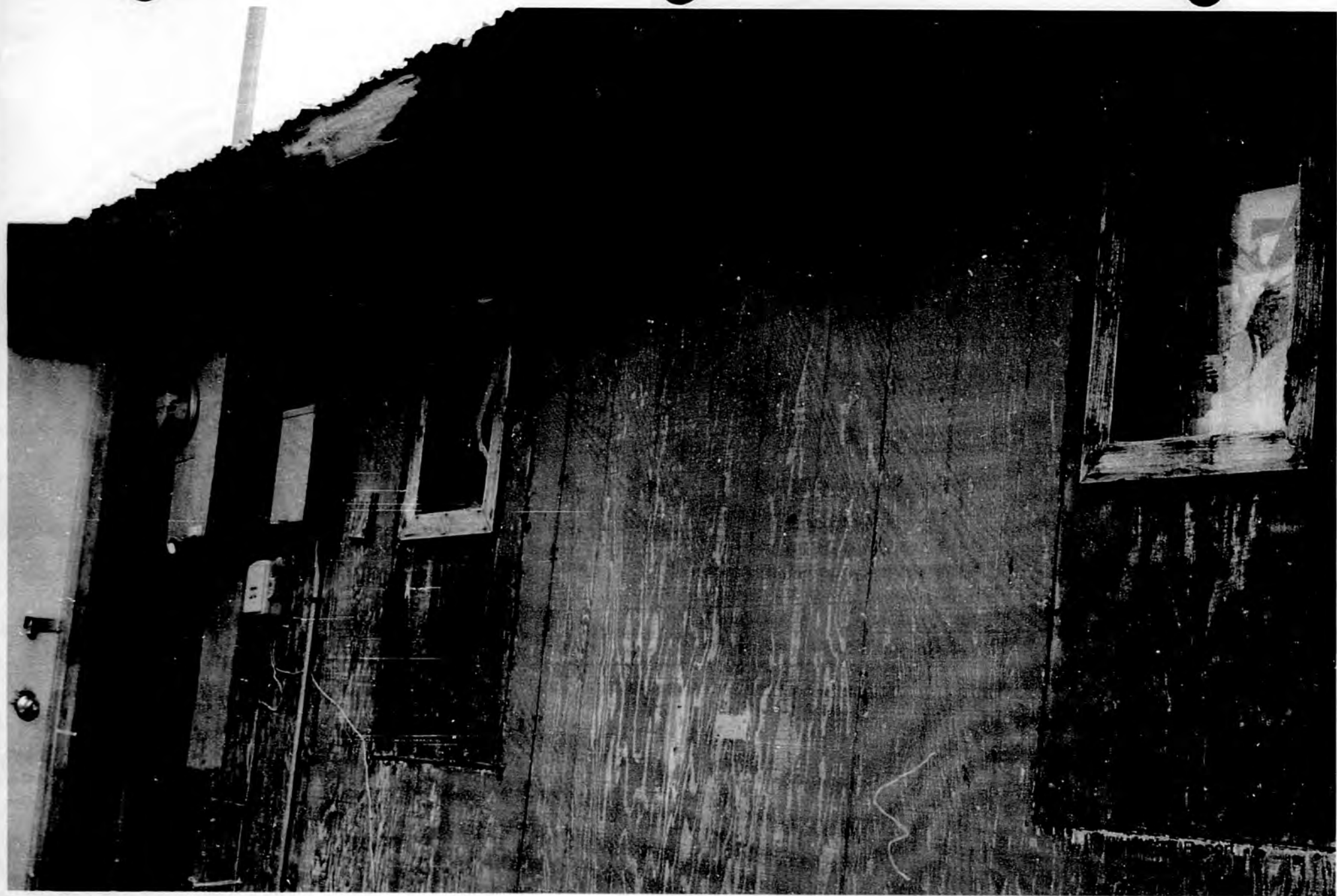
Pictures of Savoonga Public Safety Building







SAVOONGA PUBLIC SAFETY BUILDING



**Senate Village Public Safety Officers (VPSO) Task Force
Report to the Senate**

Appendix 5

Letters Sent by the Task Force Regarding VPSO Housing

ALASKA STATE SENATE VPSO TASK FORCE

SENATOR DONALD C. OLSON
CHAIR

EMAIL:
Senator_Donny_Olson@legis.state.ak.us

(907)465-3707
(907)465-4821, FAX



ALASKA
STATE CAPITOL
ROOM 514
JUNEAU, ALASKA
99801-1182

MEMBERS: SENATOR FRENCH, SENATOR DYSON, COMMISSIONER MONEGAN, ATTORNEY
GENERAL COLBERG, LORETTA BULLARD, MYRON NANENG

January 31, 2008

The Honorable Ted Stevens
US Senator, Alaska
522 Hart Building
Washington DC, 20510-0201

Dear Senator Stevens,

I am writing this on behalf of the Senate VPSO Task Force, to which I was appointed chair, to ask your assistance with housing in rural Alaska. The Task Force was created to examine the current Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) shortage in Alaska.

Throughout the past year, we heard testimony from over 110 Alaskans at meetings held in Bethel, Nome, Savoonga, Gambell, Emmonak, Mountain Village, Kodiak, Anchorage, and Juneau. We heard first hand accounts of frightening and serious situations in villages without a public safety officer. The Task Force learned that while most villages face serious difficulties with drug and alcohol abuse and the many problems that stem from that abuse, many villages take this fight on without any law enforcement officer present on site.

Statewide there are only fifty-one VPSOs serving Alaska's almost 180 villages/small communities. While the Task Force recommends increasing that number, it will take years to develop the resources within the Alaska State Troopers to provide the necessary oversight and support of the new VPSOs. Additionally, the challenges in recruiting new hires are many. Adequate housing is not the least of those problems.

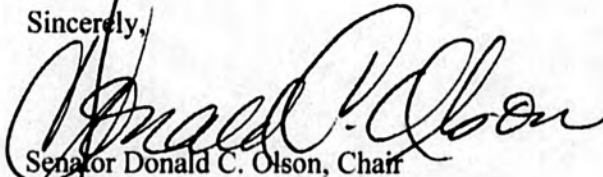
Housing in rural Alaska, as you know, is expensive to build and maintain. Some villages are able to provide dedicated housing for a VPSO, but in many cases the available space is too small for a family or is in poor repair. Housing is not a provision required by the

state Department of Public Safety or by VPSO program requirements, but has been an incentive that local non-profit organizations have used in recruitment efforts.

I am respectfully requesting that your office consider the problem of insufficient VPSO housing in rural Alaska, and do what you can on a federal level to assist. If we are able to provide suitable housing for VPSOs in the villages that need them, I believe our ability to fill the vacant positions would be vastly improved.

Your efforts in Washington on behalf of rural Alaska are very much appreciated. Thank you for your consideration of our request, and I trust you will do all that you can to assist with this pressing issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Donald C. Olson", written over the printed name.

Senator Donald C. Olson, Chair
Alaska State Senate VPSO Task Force

Cc: Task Force Members

ALASKA STATE SENATE VPSO TASK FORCE

SENATOR DONALD C. OLSON

CHAIR

EMAIL:

Senator_Donny_Olson@legis.state.ak.us

(907)465-3707

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99801-1182

MEMBERS: SENATOR FRENCH, SENATOR DYSON, COMMISSIONER MONEGAN, ATTORNEY GENERAL COLBERG, LORETTA BULLARD, MYRON NANENG

January 31, 2008

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski
US Senator, Alaska
709 Hart Building
Washington DC, 20510-0202

Dear Senator Murkowski,

I am writing this on behalf of the Senate VPSO Task Force, to which I was appointed chair, to ask your assistance with housing in rural Alaska. The Task Force was created to examine the current Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) shortage in Alaska.

Throughout the past year, we heard testimony from over 110 Alaskans at meetings held in Bethel, Nome, Savoonga, Gambell, Emmonak, Mountain Village, Kodiak, Anchorage, and Juneau. We heard first hand accounts of frightening and serious situations in villages without a public safety officer. The Task Force learned that while most villages face serious difficulties with drug and alcohol abuse and the many problems that stem from that abuse, many villages take this fight on without any law enforcement officer present on site.

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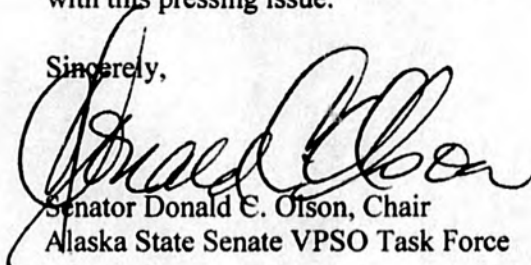
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Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Donald Olson", is written over the typed name and title.

Senator Donald E. Olson, Chair
Alaska State Senate VPSO Task Force

Cc: Task Force Members

ALASKA STATE SENATE VPSO TASK FORCE

SENATOR DONALD C. OLSON

CHAIR

EMAIL:

Senator_Donny_Olson@legis.state.ak.us

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MEMBERS: SENATOR FRENCH, SENATOR DYSON, COMMISSIONER MONEGAN, ATTORNEY GENERAL COLBERG, LORETTA BULLARD, MYRON NANENG

January 31, 2008

The Honorable Don Young
Congressman, Alaska
2111 Rayburn Bldg
Washington DC, 20515-0201

Dear Congressman Young,

I am writing this on behalf of the Senate VPSO Task Force, to which I was appointed chair, to ask your assistance with housing in rural Alaska. The Task Force was created to examine the current Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) shortage in Alaska.

Throughout the past year, we heard testimony from over 110 Alaskans at meetings held in Bethel, Nome, Savoonga, Gambell, Emmonak, Mountain Village, Kodiak, Anchorage, and Juneau. We heard first hand accounts of frightening and serious situations in villages without a public safety officer. The Task Force learned that while most villages face serious difficulties with drug and alcohol abuse and the many problems that stem from that abuse, many villages take this fight on without any law enforcement officer present on site.

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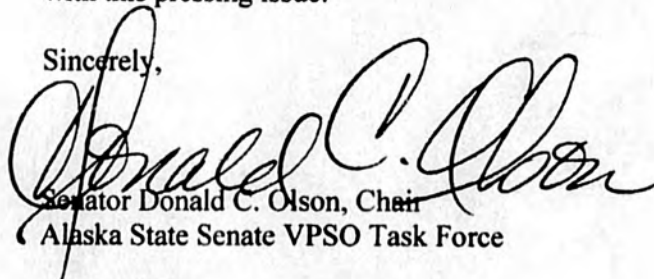
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Senator Donald C. Olson, Chair
Alaska State Senate VPSO Task Force

Cc: Task Force Members

ALASKA STATE SENATE VPSO TASK FORCE

SENATOR DONALD C. OLSON
CHAIR

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MEMBERS: SENATOR FRENCH, SENATOR DYSON, COMMISSIONER MONEGAN, ATTORNEY
GENERAL COLBERG, LORETTA BULLARD, MYRON NANENG

January 31, 2008

The Honorable George Cannelos
Federal Co-Chair, Denali Commission
510 L Street, Suite 410
Anchorage, AK 99501

Dear Mr. Cannelos,

I am writing this on behalf of the Senate VPSO Task Force, to which I was appointed chair, to ask your assistance with housing in rural Alaska. The Task Force was created to examine the current Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) shortage in Alaska.

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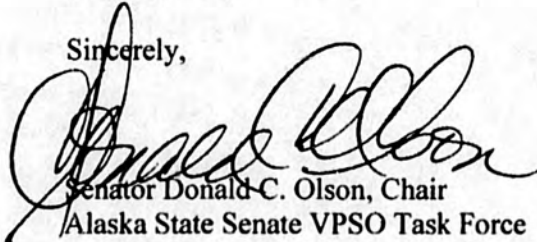
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Sincerely,



Senator Donald C. Olson, Chair
Alaska State Senate VPSO Task Force

Cc: Task Force Members

ALASKA STATE SENATE VPSO TASK FORCE

SENATOR DONALD C. OLSON
CHAIR

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MEMBERS: SENATOR FRENCH, SENATOR DYSON, COMMISSIONER MONEGAN, ATTORNEY
GENERAL COLBERG, LORETTA BULLARD, MYRON NANENG

January 31, 2008

Daniel Fauske
CEO/Executive Director, Alaska Housing Finance Corporation
P.O. Box 101020
Anchorage, AK 99510

Dear Mr. Fauske,

I am writing this on behalf of the Senate VPSO Task Force, to which I was appointed chair, to ask your assistance with housing in rural Alaska. The Task Force was created to examine the current Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) shortage in Alaska.

Throughout the past year, we heard testimony from over 110 Alaskans at meetings held in Bethel, Nome, Savoonga, Gambell, Emmonak, Mountain Village, Kodiak, Anchorage, and Juneau. We heard first hand accounts of frightening and serious situations in villages without a public safety officer. The Task Force learned that while most villages face serious difficulties with drug and alcohol abuse and the many problems that stem from that abuse, many villages take this fight on without any law enforcement officer present on site.

Statewide there are only fifty-one VPSOs serving Alaska's almost 180 villages/small communities. While the Task Force recommends increasing that number, it will take years to develop the resources within the Alaska State Troopers to provide the necessary oversight and support of the new VPSOs. Additionally, the challenges in recruiting new hires are many. Adequate housing is not the least of those problems.

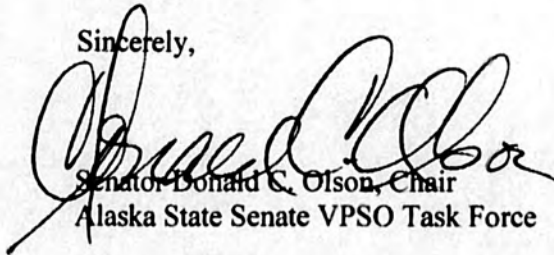
Housing in rural Alaska, as you know, is expensive to build and maintain. Some villages are able to provide dedicated housing for a VPSO, but in many cases the available space is too small for a family or is in poor repair. Housing is not a provision required by the

state Department of Public Safety or by VPSO program requirements, but has been an incentive that local non-profit organizations have used in recruitment efforts.

I am respectfully requesting that your office consider the problem of insufficient VPSO housing in rural Alaska, and do what you can to assist. If we are able to provide suitable housing for VPSOs in the villages that need them, I believe our ability to fill the vacant positions would be vastly improved.

Your efforts on behalf of rural Alaska are very much appreciated. Thank you for your consideration of our request, and I trust you will do all that you can to assist with this pressing issue.

Sincerely,



Senator Donald C. Olson, Chair
Alaska State Senate VPSO Task Force

Cc: Task Force Members