

Village Public Safety Officer Program
Sgt. Clinton O'Malley
VPSO Thorne Bay

The VPSO program was created to give the rural villages an individual who has been trained in a number of different fields. Through the years the program has matured into a jack of all trades concept, where the VPSO assumes the roll as Law Enforcement Officer, Firefighter, Fire Chief, Medic Responder, Search and Rescue Coordinator, Probation/Parole supervision assistance, Municipal Code enforcement, Animal Control and vaccinator, DARE officer, School Resource Officer duties, Jail guard, process server, prisoner transport to name the major duties of the VPSO.

Due to the current financial situation in the rural areas of Alaska, many communities are turning to the VPSO program for a law enforcement officer. The communities cannot afford full time or part-time officers and have to choose between services such as clean water and trying to maintain aging equipment or hiring a law enforcement officer. Many times the "Police Department" is eliminated from the budget to save money, and the citizens are left with the delayed response time of the Alaska State Trooper's as they respond from a Hub community.

Many of the services in the rural communities are funded by state or federal agencies. Medical, water and sewer, school's, roads, and such are funded annually by state or federal programs, except for law enforcement. Communities cannot meet the qualifications for government COPS grants, or meet the requirements for the grants to qualify for continued funding.

That's where the VPSO program comes in to fill the roll of a community based law enforcement officer. These towns see the VPSO program as a godsend, and are looking to the VPSO program for a law enforcement officer. The local governments cannot afford even a part time law enforcement officer and see the need for someone to call in an emergency, who can respond within minutes, not hours, and who is there for the community, not for the region.

Because of the ongoing lack of funding in rural towns, there are many communities in the state that are new to the VPSO Program as funding for local law enforcement has become non existent. With the decrease in income for the local governments the number of communities that are going to be applying for a VPSO position are only going to increase. With the increased demand for village based law enforcement the state has not increased funding for the VPSO program but has cut the program by 70 positions in the last five years. This seems contradictory to the statements to the media by Alaskan politicians that they support rural law enforcement.

Rural Alaska is in desperate need for law enforcement and the VPSO program is geared for these small communities. The VPSO program was created specifically for rural Alaska and that's why rural Alaska needs this program.

With the VPSO program the State of Alaska gets officers who are trained by the Department of Public Safety, and who follow almost to the letter the same procedures as the Alaska State Troopers. These officers live and work in rural communities for much

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less than the cost of a trooper. This is a one time per year grant by the state with no further costs. No retirement, medical, dental, vision, support staff (except for two funded by the grant, an accounting tech I, and a Sergeant PS). Equipment, and the cost to maintain and run the equipment. Office space and the costs associated with it. Cost of living allocation, state housing, and the myriad of costs associated with the Department of Public Safety. These are provided by the Non-Profits and the facilities by the Local Governments.

This does not include the savings to the State because of the decrease in crime when a VPSO becomes established in a community. That officer's presence within the community decreases the amount of criminal behavior and with that decrease in crime, comes the decrease in the costs of services to the victims and offenders. Medical services, correctional services (adult and juvenile), treatment services, trooper call outs, OCS, Probation/Parole, and all the other services, all funded by the state.

The cost per officer, when compared with the other law enforcement agencies in the State of Alaska show that the State gets a bargain with the VPSO program. If there was a State employee whose duties were the same as a VPSO, how much would that position cost per officer?

There are issues with the program that the state can address here and now. Many of the VPSO's still qualify for welfare. This is even true for me and my family. Without my wife working at the school and a monthly stipend from the local government I would qualify for food stamps and Medicaid. This should not be the case and this needs to be addressed. An increase in the starting salary and an increase across the board will solve this shameful aspect of the program. Also with the increase in pay the caliber of applicants will improve and the turnover rates will become steady or even decrease. The continued increases in salary to offset the increasing costs of living in rural Alaska, where all the VPSO's are stationed

Due to the current and future state of funding in the rural communities, the VPSO program's role in rural law enforcement is increasing. The Department of Public Safety has in the past few years, taken steps to streamline the VPSO program. This has been done by increasing the training time from nine weeks to ten weeks to include new training requirements, and the consolidation of non profits that administer the VPSO program.

What many people who live in Fairbanks, and the Anchorage areas don't understand is that crime in rural Alaska affects all of Alaska. If someone in a village gets assaulted or ran over because they know that there is no one to deter them, and the victim needs medical attention, where do they go if they need serious help? Anchorage or Fairbanks hospitals is where they will end up at and emergency rooms costs are astronomical. If the presence of a VPSO stops an assault at the Misdemeanor level and the person spends 30-60 days in jail as opposed to no one responding and the assault turns into a felony assault or Murder and the person spending 5 years to life in jail. Which costs the state more, the

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answer is obvious. Less time in jail, troopers don't have to fly out, and no felony supervision costs. That alone will save the State of Alaska tens of millions of dollars.

That was just for the offender. There are savings with the victim also. The costs associated with the prosecution for a felony verses a misdemeanor, the costs of the crime lab, medical examiner, and children's services to name a few.

My recommendations for the VPSO Program are based on my experiences working in rural communities and serving the program for 10 years.

Due to the cost of living in rural Alaska at an all time high and with the starting wage being so low it is almost impossible to attract applicants.

1. Raise the starting salary to \$20.00/hour.(even with this increase, many new hires will still qualify for welfare)
2. Raise the starting salary by \$1.00/hour for the next five years.
3. Raise the pay by \$5.00/hour.(offset the cost of living)
4. Increase the number of positions through out the State by 20 positions per year for three years.

Thank you for your support for the VPSO Program and your continued support in the future.

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