

Bridging the Gap

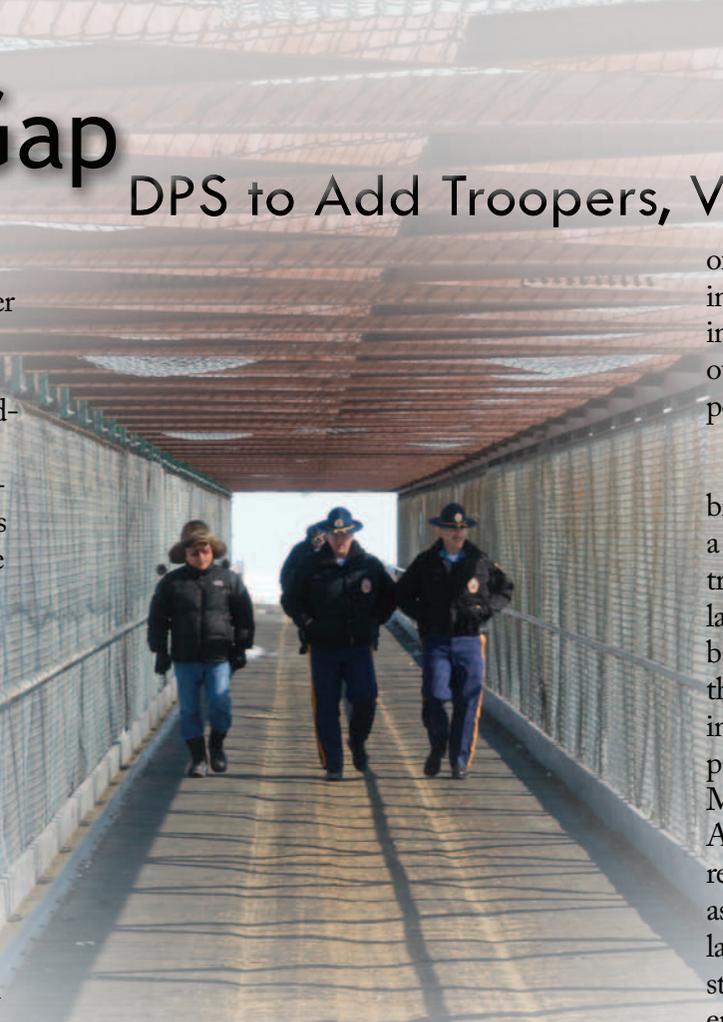
DPS to Add Troopers, VPSOs in Northwest Arctic

The ring of a church bell mingled with high-pitched sounds of snowmachines that whizzed over the frozen Selawik River. Meanwhile, the lower pitched putt-putt of four wheelers crept along the boardwalks that crisscross the blazingly bright landscape of the sunny spring day in the village. Bursts of laughter occasionally erupted from children getting out from school walking along the boardwalks that were still mostly submerged in dazzling, white snow.

The kids waved at a group of men as they walked by. The men looked tall in their uniforms and hats – standing out among the seal skin, puffy jackets and parkas. These men casually joked with children at the village grocery store while handing out plastic toy badges and fake tattoos. It wasn't normal to see so many people in uniform in the village. Usually they come either alone or in pairs. But this time, there were five of them in uniform. And this time they weren't looking for someone in particular.

It was a different sort of visit for these men. This visit, the smiling men in uniform brought good news. They were there to announce new efforts to make the village safer for its people.

At a town meeting at the Davis-Ramoth Memorial School, an Inupiat from Unalakleet named Joseph *Nashalook* Masters explained how the public safety building in Selawik will not just be an outpost for troopers visiting from Kotzebue, but will become a new permanent post for two troopers to

A photograph showing three men in uniform walking across a long, narrow bridge. The bridge has a wooden deck and metal railings. The men are walking away from the camera towards a bright light at the end of the bridge. The man on the left is wearing a dark jacket and a hat. The man in the middle is wearing a dark uniform with a hat. The man on the right is wearing a dark uniform with a hat and a blue stripe on his leg.

From the left, Northwest Arctic Borough Assembly President Walter Sampson, Trooper Gordon Young and C Detachment Commander Capt. Barry Wilson walk across the bridge in Selawik on their way to a community meeting at the school.

provide a constant presence. It was welcome news to those at the meeting – even moving one woman to tears as she told of how her son was afraid of bullies at school.

“This just didn't happen overnight,” said Masters, who is the Commissioner of the Department

of Public Safety. “The community here played an important role. The involvement and tenacity of individuals in the village leadership and at the borough level were instrumental in getting these new positions.”

Both leadership in Kiana and Selawik had lobbied for a trooper post. The City of Kiana passed a resolution in 2009 asking for DPS to provide a trooper in its community. However, Selawik, the largest village outside of Kotzebue, was selected based on the highest public safety need along with the ability to provide the community support and infrastructure needed for a trooper post. The Department of Health and Social Services and the Mental Health Trust were instrumental in assisting AST measure that need and support. Selawik has a recently renovated public safety building that served as a trooper post decades ago. In addition, the village, with its 829 residents, had the highest crime statistics for the region. Out of the 58 students enrolled in high school in Selawik, only an average of 17 to 23 students attended school daily in February of 2011, according to school officials. Over half of the community is made up of people under the age of 19.

“I think this is a history-making announcement,” said Northwest Arctic Borough Assembly President Walter Sampson, who traveled with Department of Public Safety personnel on the trip to Kiana and Selawik. Sampson has been a huge advocate for increased public safety in his borough. “For years, this region has been working hard for this.”

Kiana was not left empty handed. In addition to the two Village Police Officers that are employed and managed by the local government, Kiana now has two new Village Public Safety Officers. While regional Native nonprofit corporations have ultimate control over the VPSOs, the program relies heavily upon funding and training provided by the state of Alaska and Alaska State Troopers.

As first responders for emergencies in the village, new VPSOs Steven Ruge and Jason Turk are taking phone calls that before were funneled to Kiana City Administrator Crystal Johnson and Mayor Brad Reich.

“I’m not getting phone calls in the middle of

the night,” said the small-statured Johnson. “Since you’ve been here, I’ve been getting a lot of sleep.”

Not to mention Kiana and Kotzebue just recently went damp, meaning people are allowed to possess certain amounts of alcohol, but not to manufacture or sell alcohol. However, it still remains to be seen what kind of affect the change has on the area. Even in dry villages, alcohol is still a large contributing factor to crimes in the Bush.

To help deal with the new VPSO positions in the region, the Kotzebue post will add another trooper position that will focus solely on providing additional support and coordination for the VPSOs. This will increase the number of troopers

to cover the region from six to nine. That does not include the Alaska Wildlife Trooper or the drug and alcohol investigator operating out of Kotzebue

The increased public safety presence in the Northwest Arctic is part of Governor Sean Parnell’s initiative, “Safe Homes, Strong Families,” to make communities safer by reducing the rates of sexual assault and domestic violence. Part of this effort is to increase the number of VPSOs in the state by 15 each year. The goal is to place a VPSO in every village in Alaska that wants one. For the Northwest Arctic, that number has already increased from one VPSO for the past few years to six. In addition to VPSOs, funding to provide more Village Police Officers in the 10 villages that dot the Northwest



After the meeting in Selawik on May 4, 2011, Sgt. Duane Stone, supervisor of the Kotzebue post that provides public safety for the Northwest Arctic Region, shows off a photo of a sheefish he caught.



In front, from left to right, Alaska State Trooper Col. Keith Mallard, City Administrator Crystal Johnson, City Clerk Louise Reed and Sgt. Duane Stone from the Kotzebue post, walk through Kiana on their way to the school to meet with both community leaders and students. In back are (from left to right), Capt. Steve Arlow and Village Public Safety Officers Steven Ruge and Jason Turk.



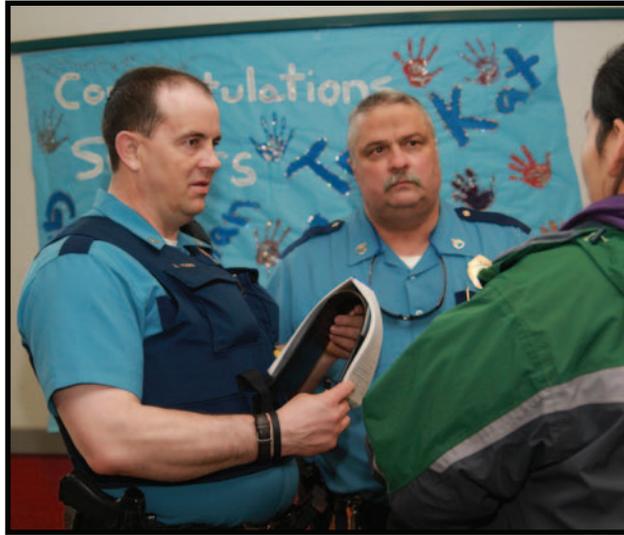
DPS Commissioner Joseph Masters, right, and Col. Keith Mallard, left, greet elders at a community meeting at the Selawik school.



DPS Commissioner Joseph Masters, on the right, hands a girl a junior trooper badge during a visit to the Selawik village grocery store while Sgt. Duane Stone, on the left, holds a bag full of the plastic badges.

Arctic, an area the size of Indiana, has also increased through grant funding to the Northwest Arctic Borough.

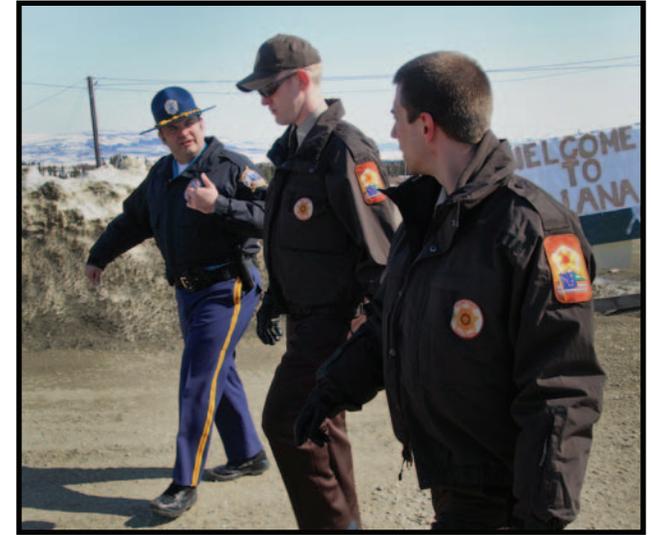
Having a trooper in town makes a difference as many people told Commissioner Masters and the uniformed men who accompanied him on his trip to Kotzebue, Kiana and Selawik. Masters was accompanied by Col. Keith Mallard, director of Alaska State Troopers; VPSO Commander Capt. Steve Arlow; newly appointed C Detachment



Trooper Gordon Young, on the left, and Sgt. Duane Stone listen to a woman as she talks about a possible assault in Selawik. The suspect was later arrested and accompanied the group back to Kotzebue where he was jailed.

Commander Capt. Barry Wilson; Sgt. Duane Stone, supervisor of the Kotzebue post; and Trooper Gordon Young, who is based in Kotzebue.

“It just warms my heart to see a uniform in the community,” Northwest Arctic Borough Mayor *Siikauraq* Martha Whiting said during a meeting in Kiana. “There’s a positive momentum going now and we want to keep going ... We’re not done yet. We have villages with needs.”



From the left, AST Director Col. Keith Mallard talks to the Village Public Safety Officers Jason Turk and Steven Ruge as they walk to the Kiana airstrip.

Commissioner Masters explained to the people he met during the trip, this effort would not have been possible if it weren’t for the work that community leaders and Alaska legislators, in particular Sen. Donny Olson and Rep. Reggie Joule, did on the behalf of the people in this region.

“The solution is here,” Masters said gesturing to the crowd. “We are a tool for you to help keep this community safe.”

