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VPSO Ranks Grow to 101

(ANCHORAGE, Alaska) – For the first time in decades, the Village Public Safety Officer Program ranks have increased to more than 100. The program hit a milestone on July 8, when the 100th VPSO was hired by the Northwest Arctic Borough for the village of Kiana. On July 25, the Bristol Bay Native Association hired a VPSO for New Stuyahok to bring the current ranks to 101 VPSO first responders in 86 communities.

The VPSO program began in the late 1970s as a means of providing rural Alaskan communities with needed public safety services at the local level. The program was designed to train and employ individuals residing in the village as first responders to public safety emergencies such as search and rescue, fire protection, emergency medical assistance and law enforcement support. The VPSOs are generally the first to respond to many calls for help from community members, hence their motto “First Responders – Last Frontier.” Since the program’s inception, the number of communities served by VPSOs has fluctuated from about 130 filled positions in the 80s, to 45 filled positions at the end of 2007.

The program has seen steady growth statewide with funds appropriated by Gov. Sean Parnell and the state legislature to increase the number of VPSO positions. Providing a VPSO presence in those rural communities that want it is part of the Governor’s continued Choose Respect campaign to eliminate the epidemic of domestic violence, sexual assault and child sexual abuse in Alaska.

Recognizing this fast growth, in 2011 the Division of Alaska State Troopers dedicated a commissioned commander, a captain, exclusively to the VPSO program. In addition, there is a trooper sergeant functioning as a training coordinator and an administrative assistant working at offices at DPS headquarters in Anchorage. Six VPSO support positions – two in Bethel and one each in Fairbanks and Kotzebue, a position in Anchorage for the VPSOs in the Aleutian Chain and one soon to be filled in Juneau for the VPSOs in the Southeast – to provide support and act as liaisons between the department, the community, and the regional contractors employing VPSOs.

Although VPSOs are not expected to handle high risk or complex investigative situations, they are first responders and act as a valuable communications link with troopers. Their immediate action can resolve many potentially volatile situations and can often protect important evidence until troopers arrive. Studies conducted by the University of Alaska Anchorage Justice Center have found that the presence of a local paraprofessional police officer – VPSO, Village Police Officer or Tribal Police Officer – [significantly decreases the rates of injury from assaults](#) and increases the likelihood of [prosecution when these officers are involved in investigating violence against women cases](#). In the vast majority of these cases, VPSOs were the first responders, according to the study.

The Village Public Safety Officer Program has all but 20 of the 121 assigned positions staffed. Below are staffing allocations among the regional contractors:

- ★ Aleutian Pribilof Islands Association (APIA) for the Aleutian Chain – seven funded positions with six filled.
- ★ Association of Village Council Presidents (AVCP) for the Bethel region – 30 funded positions with 28 filled.
- ★ Bristol Bay Native Association (BBNA) for the Bristol Bay region – 15 funded positions with 13 filled.

☀ Central Council for Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska (CCTHITA) in Southeast Alaska – 12 funded positions with nine filled.

☀ Copper River Native Association (CRNA) for the Copper River Basin near Glennallen – six funded positions with four filled.

☀ Chugachmiut Inc. for the Prince William Sound and Lower Cook Inlet region – four funded positions with two filled.

☀ Kodiak Area Native Association (KANA) for Kodiak Island – eight funded positions with six filled.

☀ Kawerak, Inc. for the Bering Straits region – 13 funded positions with 11 filled.

☀ Northwest Arctic Borough (NWAB) for the region around Kotzebue – eight funded positions with seven filled.

☀ Tanana Chiefs Conference (TCC) for Interior Alaska – 18 funded positions with 15 filled.

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A collection of VPSO photos is available at the following link:

<http://www.dps.state.ak.us/PIO/releases/resources/Photographs/General%20Photos/VPSO%20general%20photos/>