

“First Responders-Last Frontier.”



Village Public Safety Operations

January 29, 2025

Village Public Safety Operations Division
Authored by: James Hoelscher, Director



Photo Credit: Seed Media

Introduction

The Village Public Safety Operations (VPSO) Division, established in 2024, oversees certification, training and support for VPSO programs operated by regional grantees. Previously managed for several decades by the Alaska State Troopers (AST), the program's expansion into its own division reflects a major step forward, ensuring dedicated oversight and long-term sustainability of public safety in rural communities.

A cornerstone of the Department of Public Safety's mission, the VPSO program ensures rural Alaskans have access to critical services, including law enforcement, fire prevention, search and rescue, and emergency medical response. Over its 40-year history, more than 1,200 officers have served in these roles, which continue to evolve through new technologies and community engagement.

This report highlights progress over the past year, including increased officer numbers, improved retention, and the introduction of Regional Public Safety Officers (RPSOs). It also reviews key initiatives, such as enhanced compliance procedures, expanded training, and competitive wage adjustments, which have strengthened the program's foundation.

As required by Alaska Statute 18.65.670, the commissioner of DPS ensures program compliance. This report outlines the procedures developed, summarizes the results of the latest annual review, and offers recommendations for continued improvement.

With consistent legislative and administrative support, the VPSO program has entered a period of growth. The number of VPSOs has risen from 42 in January 2020 to 87 today. This growth, alongside the introduction of RPSOs and key initiatives, demonstrates Alaska's commitment to strengthening public safety in rural communities and ensuring the program remains adaptable to evolving needs.



New VPSO Coin-2025





VPSO Training Class -2024

Procedures for Compliance

Grant Recipient Oversight

1. **Clear Grant Agreements:**
 - Program requirements, including performance metrics, reporting standards, and financial accountability, are clearly outlined.
2. **Audits and Reviews:**
 - Regular audits and reviews ensure that grantees meet program objectives and comply with statutory mandates.

Annual Review Process

1. **Program Evaluation:**
 - Includes site visits, interviews with VPSOs and grantees, and analysis of operational data.
2. **Compliance Checks:**
 - Focus on training requirements, background checks, and equipment standards.
3. **Training Management:**
 - In FY24, an existing position was reclassified to create a dedicated **Training Manager** role, ensuring a centralized focus on tracking training needs and compliance.
 - A comprehensive review of the VPSO training matrix was completed, enabling better monitoring of training requirements and ensuring grantees meet statutory and programmatic expectations.
4. **Trend Analysis:**
 - Compare current compliance levels with previous years to identify trends and areas for improvement.
5. **Addressing Recruitment Challenges in Remote Areas:**
 - Recruitment remains a challenge in Alaska's most remote communities due to geographic and logistical barriers. The division is actively working to tailor recruitment strategies for underserved regions by leveraging local partnerships, promoting job opportunities through community outreach, and some programs are offering relocation incentives.



6. Incorporating SB 81 Improvements:

- The VPSO Division and Programs continue to implement regulatory changes introduced by Senate Bill 81, including enhanced training standards, background checks, and firearm policies. These changes have directly contributed to improved compliance and professionalism among VPSOs.

Transparency and Communication

1. Feedback to Grant Recipients:

- Detailed feedback is provided to grant recipients regarding compliance findings.

2. Public Access to Results:

- The annual review results are published on the DPS website for public access and accountability, following the practice established in 2023.

3. Regular Consultation Meetings:

- Consultation with grant recipients is achieved through regularly scheduled meetings and consistent communication. These meetings provide an opportunity to review program performance, address concerns, and collaboratively plan improvements, ensuring all stakeholders remain aligned with program goals.

Annual Review Results

Progress and Strengths

1. Increased Officer Numbers:

- The number of VPSO's has grown from **42 VPSOs in January 2020 to 85 today**, reflecting targeted recruitment efforts and strong legislative support.

2. RPSO Introduction:

- The introduction of **Regional Public Safety Officers (RPSOs)** has significantly enhanced each program's effectiveness by providing specialized regional support.
- RPSOs have filled a long absent and essential piece of grantee organizations. They now provide VPSOs with a first line supervisor, a role once contemplated that State Troopers would provide, but could not because of differing non-State employing organizations, distance and workload.
- RPSOs are tasked with:
 1. Expanding public safety and law enforcement presence in rural areas of the state.
 2. Providing oversight and training for VPSO's.
 3. Administering functions related to:
 - Protecting life and property in rural areas.
 - Conducting investigations.
 - Conducting search and rescue missions.
 - Leading local training programs on drug and alcohol awareness and prevention, water safety, and gun safety.
 4. Performing other duties related to public safety as directed by the commissioner.
- In alignment with legislative intent, the Department of Public Safety has repurposed RPSO positions under **AS 18.65.680** to fulfill regional and supervisory roles necessary for larger programs.

3. Improved Graduation and Retention Rates:

- The VPSO Programs have achieved a **graduation rate of over 80% in the last four fiscal years**, coupled with retention rates exceeding 80% during the same period.



4. Turnover Analysis

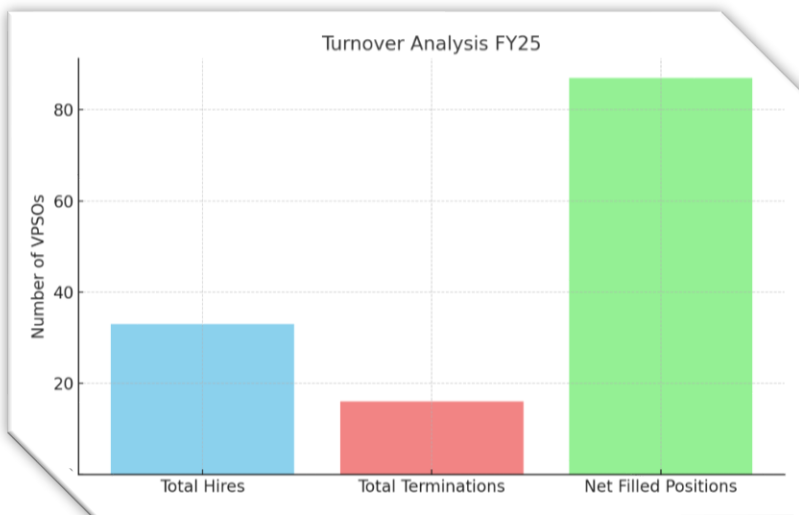
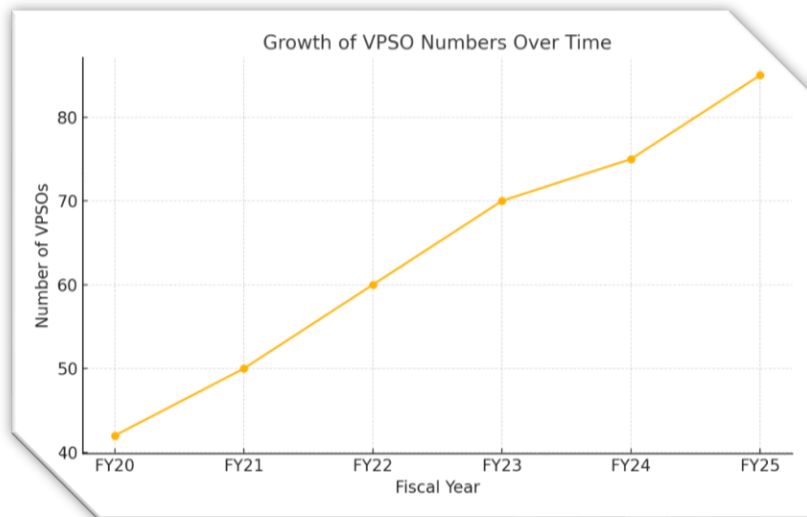
- The VPSO Programs started FY25 with **70 filled positions** as of July 1, 2024. Since then, the program has **hired 33 new VPSOs** while experiencing **16 terminations**, resulting in a total of **87 filled positions** as of January 21, 2025.

5. Fiscal Oversight:

- Financial records indicate appropriate and efficient use of grant funds, supported by regular audits and reviews to ensure compliance with division objectives and statutory mandates.

6. Partnerships with Tribal Governments and Indigenous Communities:

- The VPSO Division continues to strengthen partnerships with Alaska Native



communities, working collaboratively with tribal leaders and utilizing the Tribal Liaison to ensure cultural understanding and engagement. This year's efforts include expanded cultural awareness training and closer consultation with tribal governments to address public safety challenges unique to rural areas.

7. Investment in Technology and Infrastructure:

- Funding has been allocated to modernize equipment, upgrade communication tools, and improve facilities in rural areas. These investments address gaps identified in the 2023 report and ensure VPSOs have the tools they need to operate effectively.



8. Evaluation of Long-Term Sustainability:

- The division is committed to long-term sustainability by ensuring consistent funding, scaling efforts to meet the needs of growing rural communities and building public-private partnerships to enhance operational support.

Audit Completion Rates

- During FY24, **7 out of 10 grantees** completed audits, all conducted in the spring of 2024. Three grantees (AVCP, CRNA, and TCC) were not audited due to scheduling challenges.

Recommendations

- 1. Expand Recruitment Initiatives:**
 - Increase efforts to attract candidates, particularly in remote regions.
- 2. Strengthen RPSO Support:**
 - Expand the number of RPSOs to provide broader coverage, supervision and support.
 - Additional Support for Village Infrastructure. SB81 eliminated the full burden for providing infrastructure to support VPSO positions. Funding provided in fiscal years since has begun to cement the state's commitment to supporting communities. Example... This needs to continue incrementally to achieve the presence we need to support across Alaska.
- 3. Additional Training:**
 - Provide additional training for grantees on equipment procurement and reporting processes.
 - Facilitate opportunities for grantees to attend law enforcement supervisor training, equipping them with skills to better support and oversee VPSOs.
- 4. Improve Rural Support:**
 - Increase site visits and implement virtual check-ins to strengthen support for rural communities.

Focus on VPSO Wellness:

Address burnout and improve job satisfaction through wellness programs, mental health support, and career growth opportunities. Additionally, efforts include:

- Assigning two VPSOs to communities where possible, to foster mutual support and enhance coverage.
- Increasing the number of roving VPSOs to provide direct assistance to stationed VPSOs and to establish a presence in communities without permanent VPSO coverage.
- Prioritizing initiatives that improve work-life balance and promote long-term job satisfaction.

Conclusion

The VPSO Programs continue to be a cornerstone of public safety in rural Alaska. Recent growth, including a near doubling of VPSO numbers and the introduction of RPSOs, stresses the state's commitment to supporting its remote communities. By addressing ongoing challenges and building on the progress outlined in this report, the division and respective VPSO programs are well-positioned to enhance its impact in the coming year.

Acknowledgment

The Department of Public Safety extends gratitude to all VPSOs, grantees, and community partners for their dedication to public safety. Their efforts are instrumental in achieving the division's mission.





Mission Statement:

To achieve safer rural communities through the dedicated service of Village Public Safety Officers (VPSOs) and Regional Public Safety Officers (RPSOs), in collaboration with grantees and local communities. VPSOs and RPSOs protect lives and prevent harm by delivering law enforcement, fire protection, emergency medical response, and search and rescue, striving to build trust through leadership and partnerships. The VPSO Division also strengthens rural safety by supporting and training Village Police Officers (VPOs) and Tribal Police Officers (TPOs).



Photo Credit: Seed Media

