

“First Responders-Last Frontier.”



Village Public Safety Operations

March 02, 2026

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, 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 1,500 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 staffing levels, training outcomes, oversight efforts, and the continued development of the Regional Public Safety Officer program. It also reviews key initiatives such as enhanced compliance procedures, expanded training pathways, and sustained investment in program infrastructure.

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

As of March 2026, the VPSO program includes a total of 90 officers statewide, consisting of 80 VPSOs and 10 RPSOs serving rural communities across Alaska. This staffing level, combined with strengthened oversight and training, demonstrates the state's continued commitment to public safety in remote communities.





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 in grant agreements.

2. Audits and Reviews:

- Regular audits and reviews are conducted to ensure grantees meet program objectives and comply with statutory mandates.

Annual Review Process

1. Grantee site visits; interviews with VPSOs and grantee leadership, and analysis of operational and compliance data
2. Reviews focus on training requirements, background checks, equipment standards, and adherence to statutory and regulatory expectations.
3. In FY24, an existing position was reclassified to establish a dedicated Training Manager role, allowing for centralized tracking of training requirements and compliance.
 - A comprehensive review of the VPSO training matrix was completed, improving the Division's ability to monitor statutory and programmatic training obligations.
4. Recruitment challenges persist in Alaska's most remote communities due to geographic, logistical, and infrastructure constraints. The Division continues to support grantees through tailored recruitment strategies, community outreach, and collaboration with local partners.



Annual Review Results

Progress and Strengths

1. Increased Officer Numbers:

- As of March 02, 2026, the VPSO program includes 80 VPSOs supported by 10 RPSOs. While staffing levels fluctuate due to recruitment, training, and attrition cycles, the program maintains a substantially larger and more capable workforce than in prior years.

2. Regional Public Safety Officers:

- RPSOs provide first-line supervision, operational oversight, and regional support for VPSO programs. Their responsibilities include training oversight, investigations, search and rescue coordination, and community safety initiatives. In alignment with legislative intent, RPSO positions under AS 18.65.680 have been repurposed to fulfill these regional supervisory roles.

3. Training & Graduation Outcomes:

- During FY25, the VPSO Division delivered multiple training pathways, including two VPSO academies and University of Alaska Fairbanks–based cohorts. VPSO Academy 25-01 began with 18 recruits and graduated 6 officers, while Academy 25-02 began with 13 recruits and graduated 6 officers. UAF-supported Spring and Fall 2025 cohorts trained a combined total of four recruits, all of whom successfully graduated.
- Graduation outcomes reflect the demanding nature of VPSO training and the Division's continued emphasis on preparedness and suitability for service in remote environments. Attrition during training continues to reflect early identification of candidates who are not prepared for the operational, ethical, and environmental demands of VPSO service.

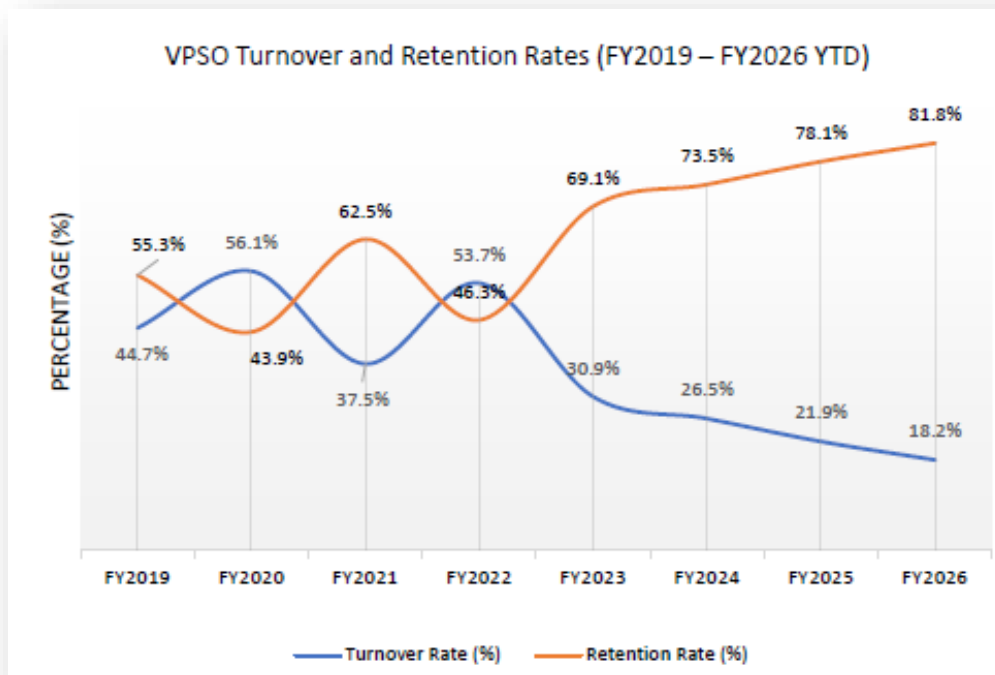
4. Retention & Program Stability

- Over recent fiscal years, VPSO programs have consistently maintained retention rates exceeding 80% once officers are deployed to communities. This sustained retention reflects improvements in supervision, training alignment, and program support, including the expansion of the Regional Public Safety Officer program. Strong retention remains a key indicator of program stability and the long-term effectiveness of public safety services in rural communities.



5. Turnover Analysis

- The VPSO program began FY25 with 70 filled positions. During FY25, the program hired 49 officers and experienced 29 separations. FY26 began with 90 filled positions. As of March 02, 2026, FY26 activity includes 17 hires and 17 separations.



6. Fiscal Oversight & Partnerships

- Financial reviews indicate appropriate and efficient use of grant funds. The Division continues to strengthen partnerships with tribal governments and Indigenous communities through consultation, cultural awareness training, and collaboration on community-specific public safety challenges.

Recommendations

- Expand recruitment initiatives in remote regions.
- Strengthen and expand RPSO coverage to enhance supervision and support.
- Continue incremental investment in infrastructure to support VPSO positions.
- Provide additional training opportunities for grantee leadership and supervisors.
- Increase rural support through site visits, virtual check-ins, and wellness initiatives.



Conclusion

The Village Public Safety Operations Division remains a cornerstone of public safety in Alaska's rural communities. As of March 02, 2026, 80 Village Public Safety Officers and 10 Regional Public Safety Officers are serving communities across the state, providing essential law enforcement, emergency response, and life-saving services in challenging environments.

The past year reflects both progress and realism. Increased recruitment activity expanded training pathways, and the continued development of the RPSO program demonstrate the Division's commitment to strengthening operational capacity while maintaining professional standards. At the same time, ongoing challenges related to recruitment, retention, and infrastructure underscore the complexity of sustaining public safety services in remote communities.

Through continued oversight, targeted investment, and collaboration with grantees and community partners, the VPSO Division remains focused on long-term program stability and delivering reliable public safety services where they are needed most.

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.



(Left to Right) VPSO Spears, RPSO Harville, & VPSO DeBose, VPSO Lejarzar, VPSO Wassilie, Director Hoelscher, VPSO Pavila & RPSO Gillila



VPSO Kvamme and VPSO Martinez posing with children at the Egan Convention Ctr., Anchorage (supporting displaced families) - October 2025



Dir Hoelscher teaching at -Kusilvak Career Academy -2025





Rural Fire Protection Academy-Bethel-2025

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).



Rural Law Enforcement Academy#43 – Yuut Elitnaurviat Center-Bethel-2025; picturing Graduates, RPSOs, VPSO Div.Training Manager, & VPSOs.

