

TESTIMONY

by

VPSO DANIEL H HARRELSON

PRESENTED TO :

THE RURAL JUSTICE COMMISSION

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Alaska Rural Justice and Law Enforcement Commission. I am proud to be here to represent the community of White Mountain, the Bering Straits Region and my fellow Village Public Safety Officers (VPSO).

My name is Daniel Harrelson and I have been employed as a VPSO for a total of about fifteen years. During these many years of law enforcement, I have seen many positive changes within our region. There are some areas that still need improvement to increase public safety for the regions population. Hopefully my comments will offer insight to this commission to assist you in your final recommendations to the Sate of Alaska and Federal Agencies. This will allow both change and continuation of existing programs that affect the quality of life for rural Alaskans.

My hometown of White Mountain is typical of many villages throughout Alaska. We have a population of about 200 people, predominately of Native Alaskan heritage and rely heavily on a subsistence lifestyle. Unemployment and poverty statistics are higher than the national norm and rates for suicide, sexual assault, sexual abuse of children, and domestic violence are alarmingly higher than national averages. Death rates for young Alaskan Native men are some of the worse in the world due to suicide and the ravaging effects of alcohol and drug abuse. The responsibility falls on all of our shoulders to try to improve the delivery of law enforcement and rural justice to all Alaskans. With that said I respectfully submit the following comments regarding issues critical to the public safety of the Bering Strait Region.

The VPSO program continues to be a success in our villages. In 1983 I first became a VPSO because I wanted to make a difference in White Mountain. When I was first hired, I earned a whopping \$9.00 per hour. It was a wage that I could not raise my family on and I was forced to seek other work. The VPSO program now pays a fair salary but still offers little in retirement benefits, unlike the Alaska State Troopers who may retire after twenty years of service and live quite comfortably. Alaska Troopers when working bush Posts receive a 25% cost of living adjustment (COLA) which helps pay for higher costs for food, lodging etc... A starting VPSO currently earns about \$29,000.00 per year or \$13.99 per hour in the Kawerak region. In comparison many troopers make close to \$100,000.00 per year with COLA. There still remains a need for improvement in wages and retirement to enhance the VPSO program and thereby attract quality applicants. Recently a survey was completed regarding issues our regional VPSOs are concerned with. Some areas that are critical are officer safety and training. Almost the entire regions VPSOs feel initial training is very good. When an officer leaves the academy he is well prepared for the job he or she faces. Once back in the village many officers are completely on their own except for sporadic visits by a trooper. Most villages have just one VPSO to answer all law enforcement calls 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 52 weeks a year. Unlike a typical police officer or trooper who goes home after duty, a VPSO remains on duty so to speak at all times. Community members when in need of help, pay little heed to what day it is or what time it is, they need help NOW. When answering a call, most VPSOs are alone and respond to Domestic Violence incidents, assaults, gun calls etc with NO BACK UP and help a long way off. Often times an officer's wife or family are the officers safety net as they lay awake nervously wondering or monitoring a radio to seek help if a VPSO needs it. Almost all VPSOs have responded to calls and found themselves facing an intoxicated person with a firearm who had just beaten up their spouse which is the most dangerous and potentially deadly call any

police officer may face. Yet a VPSO is expected to answer this call unarmed and alone and they do time after time because they care and know there is no one else close at hand to help those in need.

Ongoing training and re-certification in areas of law enforcement, fire fighting and prevention, emergency medical training is crucial to provide the very best protection for our communities. Education must be ongoing to help deliver quality enforcement of laws and to help save lives. Many times a VPSO finds himself with an expired certification and following old methods outdated and no longer in use. Twenty years ago as a VPSO we were issued a black wooden baton to assist in our work and protect ourselves. Now we have Tazers, ASP batons, pepper spray and a Kevlar vest for our protection. Most homes we enter to answer police calls have numerous firearms. New equipment should be provided to officers when and where it is needed.

I am proud to serve with and trained by the many Alaska State Troopers dedicated to the public safety of Alaskans. Every trooper who I have worked with have been true professionals and at all times demonstrated the highest degree of respect and caring in our region and State. There are however problems recognized in the delivery of this enforcement because of logistics and budget restraints that cause undo hardship for crime victims and the regions communities. A felony crime reported to the trooper office, which must be handled by the Troopers, may take weeks to be responded to. As an example I offer a recent case in White Mountain: in mid October 2004, I responded to a case involving a 16-year old female victim who was sexually assaulted by a convicted sex offender. The investigation and interviews were completed in a timely manner but the village waited and waited for the suspect to be arrested. Finally on February 18, 2005, I along with a trooper were issued an arrest warrant and able to remove the suspect to Nome's correctional facility. People in the village feel that this is too long to wait. The potential for further victims is great and fear levels high. People say if this was Anchorage or Juneau this predator would have been in jail long ago, but in the village we have to wait. It is not fair.

Currently the Nome Post of the Alaska State Troopers must serve as an almost daily prisoner escort service for prisoners from Kotzebue to Nome. The cost of this endeavor must be staggering as well as taking a trooper off their regular duties from answering calls from the area villages. The Nome trooper post responds as best it can but often times is inadequately staffed and unable to respond in a timely manner. I do applaud the efforts of Trooper Nathan Sheets in reducing the flow of alcohol and drugs into our communities. Through this efforts and expertise we are starting to make a dent in the overwhelming problem of drugs and alcohol.

The problem of alcohol and drug use in many villages is of epidemic proportions. Drugs continue to pour into the villages and countless dollars wasted. Drug dealers drive about town in new pick-ups, snow machines and boats. Openly flaunting their wealth. The penalties for their criminal behavior seem slight in comparison to the destruction they bring to our families. Community leaders have asked the AST post in Nome to have a drug-sniffing dog posted here. But are told they are too expensive. We should compare the cost and damage the detrimental effect that drugs have done to our region and our children. I ask how many suicides, assaults thefts and accidents could have been prevented if we can eradicate the source.

As a VPSO I see a greater need for tribal involvement and collaboration with the City, State and Federal government in fully addressing justice in our rural communities. Currently many misdemeanor crimes, local ordinances and juvenile issues are not being addressed by the current system. To cite an example I will use school truancy. I have a youth who refuses to attend school regularly. Following existing procedures the State District Attorneys office is notified. Due to budget constraints the State declines to actively pursue the matter. In this case the student will most likely quit school in a few months when he turns sixteen (16) and in all probability stay in the village his entire life. Being undereducated he will be more likely to have legal problems etc. If Tribally, we were able to work with him, his family school counselors and the court system we might salvage his education and put him on a track towards success. In the past numerous studies have clearly pointed out the value in tribal recognition involvement and the benefits of all entities collaboration in providing rural justice. It is time for tribal recognition and action.

In closing I wish to thank each of you for giving me the opportunity to address this commission. The actions and recommendations that you formulate will strengthen all of our communities and protect people throughout Alaska.