

Alaska Rural Justice and Law Enforcement Commission
Maniilaq's Position
February 24, 2005

The changes that have taken place in Law Enforcement over the past several decades are substantial. Most of these changes have been for the better. Many villages now have both VPSO's and village police officers. For many years, most villages had neither. Police Services were provided many times by one Alaska State Trooper stationed in a hub village. Needless to say, there was very little proactive policing taking place. This was not by design, but because the caseload one trooper would incur would be monumental by any standard. It was all he could do to pay sufficient attention to major cases (which were many), and respond to emergencies as best he could. Because of the distances involved, and the amount of time it took for a Trooper to respond to a call, many times an incident was already over by the time he was able to respond, meaning that someone had already been victimized, and someone needed to be arrested. Looking at that scenario from a distance, one might ask; "what is the problem"? Someone committed a crime, the Trooper went to the village, investigated, arrested a suspect, the victim was medevacd. At a glance, one might say that it appears that the system worked just fine. If you happened to live in that village, your opinion might be a bit different. A situation that might have been mitigated in its' early stages had been allowed to go unabated because the Trooper was unable to arrive in the village in time to prevent it. The range of victimization could have been anywhere from threat, or theft, to assault, or homicide victim. Whatever the case, the trooper was generally unable to respond in a timely enough manner to prevent some level of victimization.

In order to address this situation, some of the villages hired their own village police officers. These officers operated under the direct supervision of whatever municipal government existed in their village. In most cases, these officers were poorly trained and poorly equipped. What many of them had was motivation. They were from the village and had an interest in maintaining the peace and safety for the community. Unfortunately, this was generally the "best case scenario". Being poorly trained and equipped was unfortunately not the worst case. Many times the officer that was hired was himself a problem in the village, hired only because he was physically able to handle himself. Without proper training, many cases that were handled by these officers were lost because of lack of knowledge, or questionable veracity in court. Even taking all of this into consideration, this was still a step up from having no officers in the village. Although cases were either not filed, or lost much of the time, the fact that someone was willing to take risks in order to protect lives and property had value. Many times the Alaska State Troopers took an interest in a promising prospect and took the time and effort to provide some rudimentary training to these officers, and worked with them to coordinate efforts in order to provide better service to the villages in the region. By and large, the situation had improved, but was still light years behind what residents of our hubs and centers considered to be even adequate law enforcement, or policing.

Later, in an effort to bring police services closer to our villages and rural areas, the Alaska State Troopers initiated the "Constable" program. Constables were hired by the

Alaska State Troopers trained almost to the level of an Alaska State Trooper, with approximately the same authority and placed in hubs and major villages, with most other locations handled remotely from the hubs. This program had a good deal of merit. Had it been exploited to the fullest, it probably would have worked. It did not last long. Eventually it was phased out.

Concurrent to the founding of the "Constable" program was the establishment of the VPSO program. The VPSO (Village Public Safety Officer) program was a progression up from what was had before. Officers were hired by the Regional non-profits, trained in law enforcement, firefighting, and emergency medical response by the Department of Public Safety, and supervised by the Alaska State Troopers and the village councils in which they worked. These officers are required to work unarmed, and are still required to call on the Alaska State Troopers to handle any situations that might become hazardous. Since a great deal of what police officers do has some element of danger, VPSO's are constantly at risk of themselves becoming victims of violence. I cannot stress enough the courage and dedication of the VPSO's and the service they have done for their communities.

In order to adequately assess the VPSO program, we must look at it for what it is today in our region. Our VPSO's are not managed, or administered from our region. Currently the Kodiak Area Native Association (KANA) is administering the program from Kodiak. At last count, three out of 10 villages have VPSO's on the ground providing service to their villages. We have virtually no say as to how police and other public safety services are delivered in our villages. It is our position that the situation, as it exists now, is intolerable for the following reasons, and we believe inherently flawed:

- Under the current system, public safety services are unavailable to the majority of our villages through the use of VPSO's.
- Alaska State Trooper response to emergencies is reactionary and cannot be counted on to take place in a manner timely enough to prevent crimes from happening, or prevent victimization that could have otherwise been mitigated by quicker response by fully sworn officers located in the villages.
- VPSO response means that a situation might be mitigated, but response is limited due to the fact that VPSO's are unarmed and require direct supervision once a situation reaches a particular level. This means that Trooper response would still be required in order to handle more serious situations.
- Funding for VPSO's is required to go to regional nonprofit corporations and is not allowed to be streamed directly to a local government such as a Borough, who could use the money to fund a police force.
- Generally, VPSO's have little or no experience and are thrust into an environment where they have to make life and death decisions. Ideally, highly experienced officers would occupy these autonomous posts.

Maniilaq Association's position on the VPSO program is as follows:

- We believe that although the VPSO program has at least somewhat filled gaps in police services that the villages in the region would be better served by a professional, regional police organization operated by the Northwest Arctic Borough and at least a part of the funding would come from funds normally used to fund the VPSO's in the region. This would put professional, certified police officers residing in the villages. Officers would be required to reside in villages, thus shortening response times and professionalizing initial responses and bringing immediate investigative capacity to the communities.
- The funding stream for VPSO's that is now legally restricted to regional nonprofit corporations must be available to municipalities such as Boroughs to help fund regional police organizations. This would require a change in the law that would allow funds to go to entities other than Regional nonprofits.
- Development of a regional police agency would largely diminish the need for Alaska State Troopers and would allow them to place their valuable assets where they feel they are really needed.

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