

Testimony of
Mark Edward Springer
to the
Alaska Rural Justice and Law Enforcement Commission
April 6, 2005 Bethel, Alaska

Thank you for the opportunity to testify to the Commission this afternoon.

For the record, my name is Mark E. Springer, my address is P.O. Box 3311, Bethel Alaska 99559. My e-mail address is mark.springer@gmail.com.

I have been an Alaska resident since fall of 1976 and I have spent nearly all of that time in Rural Alaska, from Tok Junction to Manley Hot Springs to Hooper Bay, where I have made my home and raised my family. I am the Director of grant Development for the Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation, although I am testifying as an individual citizen today.

As a member for the City of Bethel Public Safety and Transportation Commission I find the opportunity to segue into a law enforcement need that is pervasive across Rural Alaska- that of new and improved facilities for the men and women who provide public safety services to our communities.

I am certain you have heard about the decrepit condition of most City and Village jails, and if you have not, just ask Senator Murkowski about her visit to the Atmautluak VPSO Office two summers ago.

In a few minutes I will be talking to you about Hooper Bay but I am compelled to put in a plug for the fact that the Bethel Police Department headquarters is really in no better condition than many other bush police stations. On the off chance that you get weathered in, or if you have some time before the plane, I am certain that Chief Dudley will be happy to show you his shop.

So, you would like suggestions and recommendations? Here's my first one- the Denali Commission should consider justice facilities- police stations (city and tribal) and sub-regional holding facilities and some of the critical infrastructure they fund. Obviously it will require a congressional appropriation, but since you ARE appointed by the Attorney General of the United States, we would like to hope that your final report will carry the imprimatur of the Administration upon it.

As I mentioned, I have lived in Hooper bay, which lies about 150 air miles due West of Bethel and is, I have always liked to say, the largest Native community in Alaska not on the road system and not getting daily jet service to Anchorage. The population of Hooper Bay today exceeds 1200, with a generally high birth rate.

Hooper Bay has a Traditional Council, and a Second Class City of the "strong Mayor" variety. I served many years as City Administrator in Hooper Bay, leaving only to take a job at YKHC here in Bethel. I first went to Hooper Bay with my then wife-to-be in 1980, and we have since raised our 6 children there in my wife Juliana's hometown.

One of the first things I tried to do when I became involved in City Government there was to ensure that the Police Department was able to provide maximum service to our large community.

Before our population exceeded 1,000 we had Village police Officers, and a VPSO. I of course cannot say enough about the VPSO Program and the men and women who so ably wear the uniform. I wish to echo every comment you have heard today from VPSO, particularly VPSO Askoak's remark about retirement. I recall many conversations with Senator Adam's office and Representative Foster's office on this very subject and I think it is an absolute shame that the Legislature took as long as they did to make VPSO's eligible for PERS when, in fact, there were other indirect state employees who were allowed into PERS, most notably the PHN's in Kotzebue who were contracted through the regional health corporation.

Now in the old days (not so far back) a VPO was hired they way they would hire a sheriff in the old west- you'd pin the badge on the soberest guy (or lady) you could find. I have hired felons as VPO's, only because they were the only people willing to do the job, which consisted mainly of picking up drunks, breaking up fights and running the lockup. As City Administrator, I myself would sometimes respond to calls for police help, because none of the cops were working.

Let me state that in Hooper Bay has always (since incorporation) provided police protection to the community.

About 10 years ago I was ^{looking} long for cops, and I ran into 2 young men in front of the Public Safety Building. It was summer and I asked them if they wanted to be VPO's. Being young and enthusiastic they readily agreed. Well, it was one of the best things I

ever did because one of these young men was James Hoelscher, who has been the Chief of Police in Hooper Bay now for many years.

Before I go much further, I would like to say that I feel you owe it to yourselves, and to the hardworking VPO's and Municipal Officers in Rural Alaska to take a good look at municipal law enforcement. The City's try like the dickens to provide services to their citizens, but as VPSO Askoak pointed out, sometimes the City literally goes broke and they disband their department- and not all communities are as lucky as Russian Mission to have a law enforcement veteran like him to serve as their backup.

Please, invite testimony from Chief Holescher and his Department. I think it will be a real eye opener.

When Hooper Bay's population went over 1,000 the VPO option no longer existed. I trust all of you know and understand the difference between Village Police Officers, Village Public Safety Officer and Municipal Police Officers.

Chief Holescher wanted municipal training, as did several of his officers. Well, the Alaska Police Standards Council will reimburse a CITY for sending officers to Municipal Academy, whether it is ALETS in Sitka, or the TVCC Academy in Fairbanks run by retired AST Captain John Meyers.

After considerable controversy in the community over whether or not the officers would get firearms training (the story is really not pretty- the night before they were to leave for the first time the City Council, hounded by a few community members voted to cancel their training and it took nearly a year to finally get them there) we sent 3 Hooper bay Police Officers to the Fairbanks Academy where they all graduated.

Chief Holescher is now a Certified Municipal Police Officer by the Alaska Police Standards Council.

Next suggestion, and I asked this of Governor Murkowski when he was in Bethel last year: why not allow the APSC to reimburse TRIBES for sending officers to Municipal Academy? What a great way for VPSO's to step up. They might have to take a pay cut, but that's another story. So please, consider this suggestion, amending the APSC statutes and regulations to make tribes eligible to be reimbursed. I mean, the TPO's already enforce State laws.

3

However, we must not dispute the existence of severe cop culture in the Alaska State Troopers and the law enforcement management community in this State that thinks anyone in the bush who is NOT a Trooper is a VPO. This thoughtful discrimination even extends to VPSO's, as you have heard.

I want to go over a few bullet points for you:

- Statistics drive law enforcement funding- the Troopers need to share the wealth and not hog all the credit, which they do too often.

- The District Attorneys offices are understaffed. They lose and misplace reports, and then try to blame the local officers for not even sending them in. We need more DA's and support staff.

- Ask AST how many empty slots they have for their VPO Academy at King Salmon. I have heard anecdotal stories of planes arriving in villages to pick up the students, who tell the pilot, "we're not going." I am not suggesting that 2 weeks of training is anywhere near sufficient, but the Troopers, the VPSO Program and municipal departments who put the training on do a good job. I think it is ironic when communities don't take advantage of this freebie.

- Federal/Local coordination- Is anyone here from the US Attorneys office? They tell the Postal Inspector to return phone calls. Please, the Alaska State Troopers are not an impermeable membrane between local law enforcement and the Federal agencies. If a VPO or a municipal officer calls the FBI or Postal Inspector or Secret Service, they should get a call back. Actually, we have noted good relations with the Feds- we thought there was an emergent meth problem in Hooper Bay back in 2001 and 2 DEA officers came right out and put on a 1 day workshop for the Hooper Bay PD, officers and VPSO's from surrounding communities. But, again anecdotally, it seems the Troopers got their blouses ruffled over that.

- Also on the federal side, the Alaska Supreme Court ruling on possession of marijuana is putting local law enforcement in a tight spot. This fall the Hooper Bay PD responded to a disturbance call in some teacher housing in Hooper Bay, found a bunch of dope- bagged up- and cash, and with a search warrant made a pretty good felony case.

Alaska, the DA hasn't said boo about it yet, perhaps cowed by the Supreme Court Decision. Well, the US Attorney can prosecute it, can't he?

I appreciate the time and effort you as Commissioners are putting into this very important subject. The people of Rural Alaska deserve the same level of police protection as the people of Anchorage.

Let me leave you with an image: It's 6 pm and the news comes on tv. A body has been discovered in Anchorage. What do you see? Lots of police, yellow tape and the crime scene unit. Now, a body is discovered in the village. What do you see? I'll let you fill in that picture yourselves.

Thank you!



Mark Edward Springer

