Could Partnerships and Education Revolutionize Alaska’s Village Public Safety Officer Program?

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Abstract

Alaska’s Village Public Safety Officers (VPSOs) are known as the first responders in the last frontier. VPSOs have been responding to crime and the issues that fuel crime, and other emergencies in Alaska’s rural villages since 1979. Today the VPSO program is confronting some of the highest rates of violence against women, alcohol abuse, suicide, and child welfare issues in the nation. Due to many serious issues, such as communication, local control, resource, and officer turnover/shortage issues, the VPSO program cannot continue down its current path. A proven solution which could revolutionize the VPSO program can be found in the city of Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. Community Mobilization Prince Albert’s HUB and COR initiative. This paper will provide an overview of how the VPSO program was established, how it functions today, and the serious issues that threaten the program’s future. An overview Scotland’s Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) and Prince Albert’s HUB and COR program will follow. The final section examines how the new VPSO initiative could function under the HUB and COR model and why education will play an important role in the new VPSO initiative.

Keywords: Village Public Safety Officer program, Alaska, Community Policing, Community Mobilization, and Rural Policing

VPSO Program Overview

The Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) programs original concept paper was published in 1979, which stated that “the approach must place emphasis upon local decision making and control to assure the program meets village objectives and concerns” (Messick, 1979, p. 8). At the heart of the VPSO program is the idea of community oriented policing. Siegel defined community orientated policing as “a police strategy that emphasizes fear reduction, community organization, and order maintenance rather than crime fighting” (2010, p. 497). The idea of local decision-making is highlighted even further by the fact that villages must choose to participate in the VPSO program and villages cannot have a VPSO imposed on them. Furthermore, villages have the final say over who serves as their VPSO and over firing a VPSO as well. Walt Monegan, a former Alaska commissioner of Public Safety further elaborated on this idea of local control by describing the positives of the program as, “they [VPSO,] actually know the individuals in their community better, [VPSOs] can have the ability to rely on those relationships and get someone to calm down, to play well with others or whatever it takes” (Kaste, 2014, p. 4).

On December 18, 1971 the United States federal government passed legislation known as the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) (43 U.S.C. 1601-1624) that was signed into law by then President Richard Nixon. ANCSA established 12 Alaska Native regional corporations (however there is a 13th corporation that was set up for all Alaska Natives that live outside the state) and over 200 village and urban corporations in an effort to solve Alaska Native people’s indigenous land claims. ANCSA and the many court battles that followed extinguished any opportunity for Alaska Native tribes to apply for Indian country status. The ability to apply for Indian country status would have allowed the creation of reservations, which would have provided Alaska Native tribes with autonomy to formulate and run
their own law enforcement agencies in the state, the only exception being one reservation in southeast Alaska known as Metlakatla Indian Community of the Annette Island Reserve.

ANCSA made Alaska Native peoples into shareholders of each regional and village or urban corporation that covered their village or region of Alaska. It was hoped the 12 Alaska Native regional corporations, along with the village or urban corporations, would provide shareholders access to viable economic security through possible employment and dividends which are distributed in years the corporations make a profit. In addition, each Alaska Native regional corporation established their own Alaska Native regional non-profit organization to administer social, health, education, and even public safety programs (when Alaska State Troopers, city, tribal, or village police were not a viable option). Since the state of Alaska has no counties, which eliminates the role of county police or sheriffs, the traditional functions of a sheriff, such as civil paperwork orders, court security, prisoner transport and mental health orders is handled by the Alaska State Troopers (AST). In addition, AST also provides law enforcement to much of rural Alaska and enforces hunting and fishing laws as well via the Alaska Wildlife Troopers. Instead of counties the state has 19 organized and one unorganized borough that do not have their own police departments (except for the city of Anchorage, Juneau, Wrangell, Yakutat, Sitka, and Haines which are consolidated city-borough governments where city police patrol most, if not all of the borough. The North Slope and Bristol Bay boroughs have their own borough police departments). Furthermore the state of Alaska is covered by federal public law 280, (18 U.S.C. §1162, 28 U.S.C. §1360) which allows states to assume civil and criminal jurisdiction over federal Indian lands. It was in this environment of ANCSA, public law 280, and a lack of borough police that provided the framework for how the Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) program came to be established as a pilot project in 1979 when 19 VPSOs were hired with the help of a federal grant. The VPSO grant program that funds VPSO salaries and equipment was created through joint partnerships between the Department of Public Safety (DPS), AST, the Alaska State Legislature, village councils or governments and elders, and grantees (referring to nine of the Alaska Native regional non-profit organizations, Kawerak, Tanana Chiefs Conference, Association of Village Council Presidents, Bristol Bay Native Association, Central Council of Tlingit/Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska, Copper River Native Association, Kodiak Area Native Association, Chugachmiut, and Aleutian/Pribilof Islands Association, along with the Northwest Arctic (NWA) borough) to provide a timely response to fires, search and rescue or emergency medical service (EMS) situations, as well as a law enforcement presence in rural Alaska villages.

The current VPSO grant process distributes grant funds yearly to grantees on July 1 and grants last until June 30th of the following year. Grantees administer the grants, and distribute grant funds to the chosen villages in each of their regions. VPSO grants cover salaries and all the costs that are associated with training. The equipment that VPSO grants cover are a VPSO’s brown colored work and dress uniform, taser, ballistic vest, handcuffs, baton, oleoresin capsicum (O.C.) spray also known as pepper spray, and beginning in 2015 the possibility of a firearm. The specific costs for travel, the type or number of emergency vehicles/equipment and salary will all vary, depending on the amount of money that each grantee feels will be enough to cover all expenses for all of the VPSOs in their region for a year. Villages that are chosen to receive grant funding from grantee regional non-profits or the NWA borough will negotiate and sign a memorandum of agreement (MOA) or a letter of agreement (LOA) with their grantee to figure out the exact break down of costs for the upcoming year in regard to upkeep of VPSO facilities/equipment, the exact duties that each VPSO will carry out, and salary as well. Before a village can be considered a recipient of a DPS grant for a VPSO from their grantee each village must provide office space, access to a telephone with long distance service, as well as build a
holding cell meeting federal guidelines. VPSO housing must be worked out between the grantee and the village in the MOA or LOA.

After a village has built a holding cell, housing (if needed), and provided long distance phone service for a VPSO, it is the Alaska Native regional non-profit organization or NWA borough, along with the village government or council and elders with the support of AST that is tasked with finding a candidate in the community to serve as a VPSO. If the search cannot find a qualified candidate in the village, than the search may be expanded outside the village, but it is preferred to hire a VPSO that is from the village he or she will be working in. The minimum qualifications to become a VPSO are that one must be 21 years or older, a U.S citizen, be of good moral character, possess a high school diploma or equivalent, and be able to pass a physical exam given by a doctor that is lawfully admitted to work in Alaska. The doctor must find that the candidate is free from any hearing, physical, visual, mental or emotional condition that would negatively affect the candidate’s ability to carry out any essential tasks that a VPSO may be asked to perform while working.

VPSO are trained at the DPS Training Academy in Sitka, Alaska and for the first time in the programs history “starting [in 2015], new VPSOs [will be] undergoing the same 15-week initial [Alaska Law Enforcement Training (ALET)] as troopers and municipal police and will include [the possibility for] firearms training [through a new 2015 VPSO arming pilot project]” (Demer, 2015, p. 3). The first class attended ALET at the DPS Training Academy in February of 2015 and was composed of 10 VPSOs. This is a large change from how training had been carried out in years past, when training consisted of a 9-week training session conducted separately from classes at the DPS Training Academy. ALET is the most elite law enforcement training in Alaska and will provide new VPSO recruits with 900 hours of training alongside troopers, municipal and airport police, state park rangers, wildlife troopers, and fire officials. The new training for VPSOs elevates the programs reputation onto the same level as troopers and other major law enforcement departments across the state. In addition, VPSOs also participate in annual training in a regional area near their village that focuses on specific topics related to any of the programs four main duties that range from search and rescue, fire protection, EMS, and public safety. Moreover, 12 VPSOs were also trained as Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) officers in 2013, which brought the total number of DARE trained VPSO across the state to 26. In addition, for those VPSOs that express a desire to carry a firearm in the village that they work in, the Alaska Native non-profit or the NWA borough, whichever employs the VPSO whom is expressing a desire to carry a weapon, along with the village government or village council must approve the arming of the VPSO in their village. Currently, only three out of the nine Alaska Native non-profits have agreed to participate in the pilot arming project, the Bristol Bay Native Association, the Association of Village Council Presidents, and the Tanana Chiefs Conference, along with the NWA Borough. The troopers monitor all VPSO firearm candidates and make the final decision over which of the candidates will be chosen to progress to the firearms training that is held at the DPS Training Academy in Sitka. Moreover, only three VSPOs out of 21 that showed interest in being armed were chosen to take part in the arming pilot project training that began on March 15, 2015. The three VPSOs that were chosen had to complete a 21-day training course that included 144 hours of additional classroom training and 60 hours of handgun training. Training covered subjects such as defensive tactics, weapons retention, professional police communication, officer survival, scenario situations, judgement training, ethics, and use of force. Furthermore, all VPSO who do pass the arming training course will have a period of a year where a trooper monitors their ability to carry out essential tasks while being armed. There will also be follow up training and practice for the three VPSOs that passed the firearms training to help reinforce the standards that were taught at the academy for firearms use. The law allowing VPSOs to
have the option to carry a handgun was spurred by the death of VPSO Tom Madole in the village of Manokotak on March 19, 2013; Officer Madole was gunned down by a man who had been suicidal and was brandishing a rifle. Madole’s death was only the second recorded fatality, since the death of VPSO Ronald Zimin in South Naknek on October 22, 1986 by gunfire. However only two VPSOs have fallen in the line of duty, there have been many VPSOs over the years that have been the victim of assault. The state’s former commissioner of Public Safety Joe Masters testified to the Alaska House State Affairs Standing Committee on February 18, 2014 in support of House bill (HB) 199 the bill that would later be passed to establish the arming pilot project, Masters cited the high rates of assault that VPSOs face as a reason why VPSO should have the option to carry a firearm. Masters described that the rates of injury assaults since 2002 “on Alaska police officers increased by 66 percent, while the rate of non-injury assaults increased by 137 percent”(Masters Testimony, 2014, p. 5). Masters went on to describe two serious incidents where VPSOs had been assaulted. The first incident took place in 2013 when a VPSO was shot in the face with shotgun pellets after a disorderly man had chased the VPSO down in a community near Bethel, Alaska a small city in the southwest part of the state. The second incident involved a VPSO being “backed down [a] street by a subject, who was tackled by another bystander and did not shoot at the VPSO” (Masters Testimony, 2014, p. 5). The second incident that Masters described took place near Kotzebue, Alaska, the largest community in the NWA borough. Furthermore, Masters stated, “there are many similar examples” in regard to the two VPSO that had been the victims of assault that Masters had described (Masters Testimony, 2014, p. 5). In addition to allowing officers the option to carry a weapon and expanding training VPSO salaries have recently been raised as well. The starting salary for a VPSO’s first 6-months on the job is $25.27 per hour and after an additional 6-months or a full year on the job VPSO will receive an increase to $26.11 per hour. In addition, “with overtime [VPSOs] can make $60,000 to $80,000 a year”, but the amount of money that is available for overtime pay depends on the amount of money that is distributed yearly via the state VPSO grants (Clinton, 2013, p. 4). Furthermore, VPSOs are provided a 401(k) retirement plan through the Alaska Native non-profit or the NWA Borough, along with healthcare coverage. However VPSOs that are Alaska Native are eligible to receive free healthcare through tribal healthcare organizations, such as the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium or the Southeast Alaska Regional Health Consortium or their Alaska Native regional non-profit.

A regular day for a VPSO can vary quite dramatically; since the exact duties of each VPSO vary depending on what the village government or council in coordination with the Alaska Native regional non-profit or the NWA borough and with support from AST, together feel is the most pressing need in each village. This is laid out for each VPSO in the MOA or LOA that each non-profit and the NWA borough sign with villages. The MOA or LOA will lay out what exactly a VPSO will do in a village that he or she is working in and it will cover things such as tasks a VPSO must carry out (pertaining to law enforcement, general public safety, EMS services, fire protection, and search and rescue) the process for submitting time cards to the VPSO coordinator or director, how to stay in contact with AST, and ways a VPSO may be fired. In addition, the hours a week a VPSO will work range between 37.5 to 40 hours. The size and natural surroundings of villages that VPSO work in across the state vary as well, from 600 in the village of Kake, in southeast Alaska (a temperate rainforest on the coast of the Pacific Ocean) to 102 in the village of St. George, an island that is part of the Pribilof Islands in the Bering Sea west of the Aleutian chain (an oceanic climate) and to 296 in Eek, in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta region of southwest Alaska (a climate that is a mix between colder oceanic and subarctic). Furthermore, AST Captain Andrew Merrill, DPS VPSO program Commander stated to me that the villages of Hooper Bay, Kake, and Noatak currently have two VPSOs working together or working in villages that are in close proximity to each other. Captain Merrill went on to state that Hooper Bay, Emmonak,
Illiamna, Selawik, and Unalakleet all have a VPSO and a trooper working in the same community. Additionally, a VPSO in Saxman is on the same island as the Ketchikan trooper post and the VPSO in Hydaburg is on the same island as the Prince of Wales trooper post. Captain Merrill also stated that there are currently five roving VPSOs that serve smaller communities from the regional hub communities of Nome, Kodiak, Fairbanks, Bethel, and Kotzebue. The reason why the smaller communities may have to be served by a roving VPSO could be due to a VPSO being away for a period of time or serious infrastructure issues standing in the way of a community from having a VPSO. Lastly, in some areas of the state VPSOs work in close proximity to villages that employ a village police officer (VPO) or a tribal police officer (TPO) that are directly employed by villages or tribes, but the total numbers of VPO or TPO are not known. However, Captain Merrill did go on to state that villages or tribes in the Yukon-Kuskokwim and the Northwest Arctic borough areas probably have the most VPO or TPO employed by tribes or villages than anywhere else in the state (DPS VPSO program Commander Captain Merrill, personal conversation, March 26, 2014).

To put what VPSOs do in perspective for the rest of the country, a VPSO can be thought of as a deputy sheriff of sorts for AST across rural Alaska. Captain Steve Arlow, a former DPS VPSO commander for the state described the role of VPSOs as, “[AST] can’t be everywhere [and] [t]he State and the regions decided to put a public safety officer in these communities, someone that was our eyes and ears on the ground” (Clinton, 2013, p. 2). In addition, VPSO oversight troopers are stationed in hub communities across rural Alaska to support the mission of the VPSO program and to provide a law enforcement presence in the larger communities of rural Alaska. Moreover, the Alaska Bureau of Investigations, the Rural Service Unit based out of the interior city of Fairbanks, and the Special Emergency Response Team also provide support to VPSOs and VPSO oversight troopers in times of need. VPSOs have weekly telephone contact with an oversight trooper or another trooper from AST. The grant contract which DPS signs with all of the grantees will specify the exact amount of in person visits that a trooper or an oversight trooper will make a year out to each VPSO that is employed by the nine non-profits and NWA borough. The amount of in person visits AST will make out to all of the VPSO across the state will vary from 2 or more a month to 2 or less a month. The variation in the amount of AST in person visits with VPSOs across the state is due to a range of reasons possibly stemming from funding, time, weather, and short staffing levels.

Even with the added training, and pay increases that have been provided for VPSO in recent years, Troy Eid, the chairman of the Indian Law and Order Commission that published a Federal Report titled A Roadmap for Making Native America Safer for Congress in 2013 stated that “[t]he current system is broken” and chairman Eid went on to state that “[y]ou have 75 [Alaskan] communities with no policing at all” (DeMarban, 2013, p. 1). The next few sections will examine current issues with the VPSO program, along with the high rates of crime across Alaska, and other issues that play a factor into why the VPSO program needs to put into place a community mobilization initiative that is modelled off of Prince Albert’s HUB and COR.

**Issues with the VPSO Program -**

Howard Amos, the mayor of Mekoryuk a village located on the north side of Nunivak Island, which lies off the west coast of Alaska in the Bering Sea was a VPSO for 10 years in Mekoryuk. Amos “would get calls at all hours and have to arrest people close to him in the Eskimo community of 200” (D’oro, 2008, p. 5). The pressure and low pay became too much for Amos and he eventually quit, stating that “my family was becoming concerned for my health [and] [a]fter some time, you lose all
your friends. That sort of thing happens in small communities” (D’oro, 2008, p. 5). Amos’s story of leaving the VPSO program, due to stress and low pay is sadly not uncommon. Darryl Wood, assistant professor of criminal justice and criminology at Washington State University further elaborated on Amos’s story with a report he published in the Alaska Justice Forum that focused on why turnover rates for the VPSO program are so consistently high. Wood (2000) began his report by stating that since “1983, the first year for which adequate records are available, turnover in the VPSO program has averaged 36 percent per year. In other words, for every 100 VPSO’s to have served in a calendar year 36 either quit or were fired” (p. 1). Even today the program continues to struggle with turnover rates, which was highlighted by AST Captain Steven Arlow, the former DPS VPSO commander, who stated that “[turnover] is about 33 percent” (Arlow Testimony, 2014, p. 10). However Captain Arlow went on to state that “it is not accurate to say that the entire program is at 33 percent, because it is more of a region-specific turnover [and] there are some stable regions that have very little turnover” (Arlow Testimony, 2014, p. 10). Today there are 76 VPSO working statewide (DPS VPSO program commander Captain Merrill, personal communication, March 26, 2015), which is down from roughly 121 a year or so ago, “but troopers say they do have funding to have as many as 121” (Angaiak, 2014, p. 3). Captain Merrill further elaborated on the complex issues which can surround VPSO turnover rates as “we have VPSOs who quit because they don’t want to arrest their uncles, their brothers and sisters, [and] one VPSO was tasked with arresting her own son” (Bernard, 2014, pp. 13-14). Alaska State Senator for District T (the area around the western Alaska city of Nome) Donny Olson described the issue of burn out for VPSOs as “[t]hese people are the first line of defense [and] it’s easy to burn out. It’s easy to get tired and worn out, and you don’t have any backup”(D’oro, 2008, p. 2). Wood’s (2000) report went on to examine the results of a survey sent to current and retired or fired VPSO officers asking 129 questions about how officers or former officers felt about their experience with the VPSO program. The survey asked questions from training to working conditions (including questions about relationships with oversight Troopers from AST) and for those officers who were not with the program anymore why they resigned or were terminated.

A few of the largest issues the report found was that officers who did not have a crucial tie to the village they were working in were more likely to feel like an outsider and use the program as a stepping stone to a larger police department in the state. In addition, former officers cited training as problematic because they felt as though they did not have enough training that focused on the unique duties of what a VPSO officer would have to face. Another problematic area in some circumstances was communication with an oversight trooper or the Alaska Native regional non-profit organization or NWA borough for help or advice. In addition, another issue that was raised was the lack of funding from villages or the state for facilities or equipment. Many VPSOs that left the program had indicated in their surveys that stress and support issues were the two largest reasons why they chose to leave.

Roberts (Winter 2005) further elaborated on Woods’ (2000) report by conducting a review of the literature pertaining to rural public safety issues across Alaska. The main issues that Roberts (Winter 2005) found in regard to the VPSO program were communication, training, support, turnover, local control, and a lack of resources. Roberts (Winter 2005) offered a few suggestions that could help support VPSOs, such as “increasing the personal contact between troopers and VPSOs” and “increasing communication and interactions between troopers, community leaders, and rural residents”(p. 4). In addition to local control issues, Roberts (Winter 2005) also suggested that “criminal justice agencies [should] assess their operating procedures and resolve any conflicts between local and state social control methods, that police incorporate traditional values and follow community preferences” (p. 8).
Crime in Rural Alaska

Andy Stern, a resident of Nunam Iqua, Alaska, a village of less than 200 residents that is located on the coast of the Bering Sea in southwest Alaska by the mouth of the Yukon River, described how order is kept in one of the 75 rural Alaska communities which does not have police. Stern stated that “[s]ome people do get trigger-happy, and I have to stay up and protect my family. And to protect my family, I have to have a loaded gun ready” (Sutter, 2014, p. 6). Horowitz (2014) further expanded on the state of crime in rural Alaska by stating that,

[r]ural Alaska has the worst crime statistics in the nation’s Native American communities – and the country. Alaska Native communities experience the highest rates of family violence, suicide and alcohol abuse in the United States: a domestic violence rate of 10 times the national average; physical assault of women 12 times the national average; and a suicide rate almost four times the national average. Rape in Alaska occurs at the highest rate in the nation – three times the national average (p. 3).

Canfield (2013) also cited startling statistics from the Indian Law and Order commission’s 2013 federal report that found that “Alaska Native women are over-represented in the domestic violence victim population by 250 percent; they comprise 19 percent of the population [of the state], but 47 percent of reported rape victims” (p. 2). The FBI’s 2013 Uniform Crime Report (UCR) was the first to use a new definition for rape1 that the state of Alaska implemented into its crime reporting on January 1 of 2013. Shedlock (2014) examined the rate of rape in Alaska under the FBI’s revised definition for rape and found that, “the number of rapes – under the revised definition – known to police in Alaska totaled 922. If the old definition was applied, that total would [have been] 644” (p. 3). In addition the new definition of rape also had an affect on “the state’s rape rate, from 87.6 rapes per 100,000 residents to 125.4 rapes” (Shedlock, 2014, p. 3). Bernard (2014) summed up the state of rape in the state as “Alaska has earned an unnerving epithet: It is the rape capital of the U.S.” (p. 5). In addition, Shedlock (2014) examined other findings from the FBI’s 2013 UCR and found that “[t]here were 4,708 violent crimes in 2013. Most of those crimes were aggravated assaults, totalling 3,128. In 2012, there were 4,412 violent crimes” (p. 6). The 2013 UCR also highlighted that Alaskan “[l]aw enforcement agencies reported 34 murders and non-negligent manslaughters” (Shedlock, 2014, p. 6). Moreover, “[t]here were 624 robberies, 2,916 burglaries and 21,210 property crimes statewide” (Shedlock, 2014, p. 6).

Troy Eid, the chairman of the Indian Law and Order commission’s 2013 report described that “[t]he problems tribes face in the lower 48 are magnified in Alaska, which still relies on a colonial model (of justice) that results in more violent crime” (DeMarban, 2013, p. 1). Furthermore, Associate U.S Attorney General Tony West, summed up the bleak situation in rural Alaska as, “It can take a day and a half before responders show up to the scene of a crime or to a call for help. Imagine if you were a victim of violence and you can’t get help because weather conditions don’t allow you to get out of your village. Where are you supposed to go? You have nowhere to go? “ (Horowitz, 2014, p. 4). Magnifying the crime that VPSOs face is the opinion of law enforcement by some rural Alaskans, which was

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1 Rape as defined by the FBI’s 2013 Uniform Crime Report (2013, p. 1) as “[p]enetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim”.
highlighted by the mother of a murdered girl in Kake, Alaska who stated that, “people really don’t fear
the law here” (Horwitz, 2014, p. 8).

The map of Alaska below is from the 2012 Alaska State Troopers 2012 annual report, which highlights
the high rates of crime that VPSO face across the state in each of AST’s zones. The map also illustrates
the vast distances that exist between many villages and the closet AST duty post, which are displayed in
red squares on the map below. Also the map highlights where two Troopers were killed on May 1, 2014
in the village of Tanana.

*Note: Not all crimes are reported by detachment areas. There were 10 homicides, 619 assaults, 95
sexual assaults and 267 reports of sexual abuse of a minor in addition to those shown in the chart.
Rural Alaska Suicide, Alcohol Abuse, and Child Welfare Issues

In addition to dealing with some of the highest crime rates in the nation, VPSO also must confront some of the highest rates of suicide, alcohol abuse, and child welfare issues in the nation as well. DeMarban (2013) further elaborated on the issues VPSO face by stating that “more than 200 Alaska Native villages suffer some of the nation’s highest rates of domestic violence, sexual assault, suicide and other problems” (p. 2).

Ron Perkins, the former director of the Alaska Injury Prevention Center described the state of suicide in rural Alaska by stating that “[r]ural Alaska has some of the highest rates in the world for suicide” (Yardley, 2007, p. 1). Moreover, Yardley (2007) described that “[n]atives aged 10 to 19 make up just 20 percent of the state population in that age group, but accounted for 61 percent of its suicides” (p. 1). Andrews (2013) elaborated on Yardley’s (2007) statement by describing the rate of suicide in Alaska between 2007 through 2011 as “771 suicides were reported in the state — 49 percent by American Indian and Alaska Natives, 22 percent by whites, 14 percent by African Americans and 8 percent by Asian or Pacific Islanders” (p. 1). Caldwell (2014) went on to state that “[a]ccording to the latest numbers from the Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics, there were almost 22 suicides for every 100,000 people in the state” (p. 3). Moreover, “the Northwest Arctic Borough [had a rate for teens that was] seven times [the rest of the state], based on data collected between 2008 and 2012” (p. 3). A few of the main issues that occur in rural Alaska that play a role in the high rates of suicide are untreated depression or mental illness, due to a lack of services, alcoholism, a lack of economic opportunities, and a loss of native culture. Perkins also described another lesser known issue, which is that “[m]any native families are reluctant to discuss suicide” (Yardley, 2007, p. 2). In addition, “roughly 80 percent of Alaska suicide victims are male” (Yardley, 2007, p. 1). Diane Casto, the section manager for prevention & early intervention division for the state of Alaska’s division of behavioral health described why young native men turn to suicide at such high rates, “[t]hey’ve lost their culture, they don’t have a way to support their family, and than what we see is a lot of alcohol and drug use, particularly alcohol” (Yardley, 2007, p. 2).

Alcohol Abuse

Alcohol abuse presents many serious issues for VPSOs, such as fuelling violence, death, and sexual assaults rates in rural Alaska. Alcohol is especially an issue when it comes to rural Alaska, since the Indian Law and Order commission’s 2013 federal report found that “[m]ore than 95 percent of all crimes committed in rural Alaska can be attributed to alcohol” (Canfield, 2013, p. 2). In addition, another serious issue that alcohol presents to VPSOs is the fact that “[a] total of 108 Bush communities have voted in favor of local option laws, which ban the sale, importation or possession of booze, or all of the above” (Shedlock, 2014, p. 2). Chomicz (2015) further expanded on the issues surrounding local option laws in rural Alaska by describing how bootlegging has taken hold in many rural villages, since “[a] bottle of alcohol legally purchased for less than $10 in a city liquor store can be sold in a dry village for $150 to $300 per bottle” (p. 1). Chomicz (2015) also stated that “[p]owdered cocaine is more commonly found in villages” (p. 2). Furthermore, the Nome Police Chief John Papasodora described that “[h]eroin is arriving in Western Alaska hubs by air and by sea” (Glaser, 2014, p. 2). Glaser (2014) went on to state that “[d]rugs sold on the Seward Peninsula can sell for twice as much as in Anchorage, making the city an attractive target for [o]utside dealers” (p. 2). Heroin that is brought into Nome has also been distributed throughout western Alaska villages where VPSO work. In addition, “[a]lcohol is the ‘primary abused substance’ in Alaska and contributes to many deaths,
especially in rural areas” (Chomicz, 2015, p. 1). Lastly, the commission’s 2013 federal report went on to describe the rate of alcohol-related mortality for Alaska Natives for 2004-2008 was 38.7 per 100,000, a rate that was “16.1 times higher than the rate for the U.S. White population over the same period” (Canfield, 2013, p. 2).

Child Welfare Issues

The Alaska Department of Health and Social Services director of the Office of Children’s Services (OCS) Christy Lawton described the link between alcohol abuse and child welfare issues as, “[s]ubstance abuse is a huge problem in these cases [and] some 80 percent of cases [are] connected in some way to substance abuse” (Restino, 2012, p. 2). In addition, youth that are raised in an environment of substance abuse and violent behaviour have to deal with stress and abuse, which takes away from their ability to succeed in school and life.

Director Lawton went on to describe two large issues that OCS has faced in rural Alaska, “[f]irst, it is difficult to keep staff in the rural communities, and at times, those areas will have as many as half of their positions unfilled” (Restino, 2012, p. 2). The second issue that Director Lawton pointed out was that “it is difficult to find Native Alaska foster families” (Restino, 2012, p. 2), however this could stem from negative interactions that Alaska Native families have had with OCS in the past.

Deborah Hull-Jilly the principal investigator for the Alaska Violent Death Reporting System (AVDRS), described the impact of violent crime and substance abuse on the rates of infant deaths by “stress[ing] the role that alcohol and drug use by caretakers plays in creating unsafe sleeping environments for infants” (Andrews, 2013, p. 2). Andrews (2013) also described that “infants made up only 1.5 percent of the Alaska population, [but] they represent[ed] 5 percent of violent deaths (including Sudden Infant Death Syndrome)” (p. 2). In addition, the head of the Alaska Mental Health Trust, Jeff Jessee stated that “Alaska has the highest documented rate of FASD in the nation” (Buxton, 2015, p. 2).

Moreover the Indian Law and Order commission’s 2013 federal report stated that “60 percent of the 769 children removed from their homes were Alaska Native children”. The report also found that “[i]n 2011, over 50 percent of the 4,499 reports of maltreatment [were] substantiated by Alaska’s child protective services” (Canfield 2013, p. 2). Lastly, May Anne Mills, The tribal council chairperson for the Kenaitze Indian Tribe that live on the Kenai Peninsula in the south central region of Alaska stated that “[w]e are fighting for our lives here. We have the highest rates of almost all deplorable conditions known to mankind” (DeMarban, 2013, p. 2). To deal with the high rates of crime, alcohol abuse, suicide, and child welfare issues in rural Alaska where VPSO work, there must an understanding of the many additional issues that factor into the current state of life in rural Alaska.

Additional Issues in Rural Alaska

Rural Alaska has many unique issues that make a VPSOs job much harder than most law enforcement officers across the United States. These issues range from darkness, extreme cold, lack of roads, remoteness, high cost of living, and working in a small close-knit community. However two of the most pressing unseen issues that VPSOs must wrestle with everyday is intergenerational trauma2
stemming from the state's tragic history with Alaska Native peoples and silence. Contact with white explorers began when Russians landed their ships in the Aleutian Islands in the mid 1700s. The Russians degraded and fought many tribes on the coastal areas of the state to further their fur trading business. The Russian-American company would eventually set up a vast network of trading posts and towns that had a monumental impact on Alaska native tribes. In 1867 Alaska was purchased from Russia by the United States, which brought an influx of United States military service members into Alaska. The next white outsiders to make contact with Alaska Native peoples were gold prospectors. The Yukon, Nome, and Fairbanks Gold Rushes in the late 1800s brought thousands of gold prospectors to southeast, Nome, the Fairbanks area, and the Yukon River. Boomtowns sprang up all over Alaska during this time, which brought discrimination, violence, and exploitation to Alaska Native peoples and their land. After the many gold rushes ended, it was missionaries that established a network of missionary and later boarding schools throughout the state in the late 1800s. The missionaries viewed Alaska Native youth as savages that needed to be saved. This resulted in sexual abuse, beatings, and death. The boarding school experience for Alaska Native youth was sadly much of the same type of horrible treatment, but with more funding from the federal or territorial government (later state in 1959). Alaska Native youth were sent to faraway places across the territory and to other states. Estus (2016) described one of the many boarding schools located across Alaska, the “Wrangell Institute, a boarding school notorious for physical and sexual abuse” (p. 3).

Furthermore, adding to the terrors of missionary and boarding schools for Alaska Native peoples was a horrific influenza epidemic that began around 1900. The outbreak killed thousands of Alaska Native peoples, including hundreds of elders, who are the keepers of traditions and knowledge. Napoleon (1996) described the outbreak as “kill[ing] whole families and wiped out whole villages [and] [i]t gave birth to a generation of orphans” (p. 10). 40-years later in the midst of WWII over 800 Aleuts were forced to move into relocation camps (aka old abandoned fish canaries), which resulted in 107 deaths. Abuse by catholic priest in the 1960s left deep emotional scars for many Alaska Native men and women of today. Lobdell (2005) summed up the state of abuse in rural Alaska by the church as, “[t]wo remote Alaska villages are still reeling from a Catholic volunteer’s sojourn three decades ago, when he allegedly molested nearly every Eskimo boy in the parishes” (p. 1). Intergenerational trauma is not an excuse for violence against women or any other crimes committed in the state by Alaska Natives, but understanding the past will give context to the present and its role in why the current situation in rural Alaska is the way it is today.

Silence has become a reaction to suicide, sexual abuse or assault in much of rural Alaska villages. Bernard (2014) listened to a women tell her that “historically, the kind of sexual abuse and assault so many people were experiencing was huklani, or bad luck, so no one spoke openly. ‘It was taboo’ she said, [l]ike, bad you don’t talk like that, you don’t say that” (p. 18). Moreover, “family members often blame the victims, or friends of victims, who attempt to report a crime, out of fear of losing material support, or a vital link in [the] precarious web of familial structure” (Bernard, 2014, p. 11). A story that highlights the issues with victim blaming was the family of a young man from the village of Tanana,

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2 Intergenerational trauma as defined by the Intervention to Address Intergenerational trauma (winter, 2012, p. 3) (a collaborative review conducted by the Urban Society for Aboriginal Youth, YMCA Calgary and the University of Calgary) as “the transmission of historical oppression and its negative consequences across generations. There is evidence of the impact of intergenerational trauma on the health and well-being and on the health and social disparities facing Aboriginal (a.k.a. Alaska Native, Native American and Native Hawaiian) peoples”.

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Alaska, who had been accused of abusing children reacted by turning on the victims and stating, “shame on you. He had his whole life in front of him and you’re going to ruin it” (Bernard, 2014, p. 11). The owner of the Tanana general store Cynthia Erickson, who is originally from the village of Ruby, Alaska is a determined voice to change the old ways of silence described the commonness of victim blaming as, “[t]his story of Tanana is absolutely no different than every single one of these villages” (Bernard, 2014, p. 7). Erickson described how recent findings of men being abused in their youth is “why there’s so much alcohol and drugs. That’s why there’s so much rape. They don’t feel good, they black out, and alcohol and drugs cover the pain. That’s why we’re so dysfunctional. Nobody’s dealing with it” (Bernard, 2014, p. 16). In addition, OCS Director Lawton stated that, “I think that some of the well known complex trauma issues that many of our communities are facing in terms of generational kinds of issues and struggles are a factor” and the director continued “[t]here are a lot of hurting people, so it just continues the cycle” (Restino, 2012, p. 2). A possible way to begin to turn the tide against intergenerational trauma and silence could be community meetings. In addition, meetings could provide VPSOs with a way to discuss issues prior to a violent event occurring or an arrest being needed. Weekly community meetings modeled off of the P.A. HUB and COR program could be the answer to ending the silence.

**Scotland’s VRU and Prince Albert’s HUB and COR**

Prince Albert, Saskatchewan was a city plagued by some of the highest crime rates across Canada for decades until 2011 when the city implemented a new model of policing. A model based on the Violence Reduction Unit that was established in Glasgow, Scotland. The VRU was based on the public health model of policing and was focused on ending the city’s gang violence. Carnochan and McCluskey (2010) defined the public health model of policing as “treat[ing] the problem of violence as a ‘disease that can infect, spread and ultimately lead to death and disability” (p. 403). Furthermore the theoretical basis for the public health approach to crime is the epidemiological perspective of criminology, as this criminological theory intertwines the public health models key concepts.

Prince Albert’s new model is known as community mobilization Prince Albert, the HUB (focuses on the individual or family wellness level) and COR (focuses on the overall community wellness level). The HUB is a collective of roughly 32 social service providers (police, fire fighters, teachers, First Nations leaders, youth addictions, mental health, public housing, addictions, and others) that meet twice a week to discuss at-risk community members or families. The mission of the HUB is focused on working smarter together and combining all of the social service provider’s unique skills to help those most at-risk in the community. After the HUB has identified an at-risk individual, a rapid response action plan is put into place using the combined resources and skills of the HUB. A HUB rapid response plan must be put into action within 24 to 48 hours. Former Prince Albert police Chief Dale McFee elaborated on the idea of the rapid response by stating that “all the agencies are there, 32 people around the table, they’re bringing issues every day to get it done and it’s not allowed to not get done within 48 hours” (de Souza, 2011, p. 2). All HUB members sign non-disclosure agreements, along with

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3 Epidemiological criminology as defined by Lanier (2010, p. 72) as “the explicit merging of epidemiological and criminal justice theory, methods and practice. Consequently, it draws from both criminology and public health for its epistemological foundation. As such, EpiCrim involves the study of anything that affects the health of a society, be it: crime, flu epidemics, global warming, human trafficking, substance abuse, terrorism or HIV/AIDS”.

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only being allowed to take notes on cases that involve their agency and names of at-risk individuals or families are only discussed in the most extreme cases.

The Centre of Responsibility (COR) is the second component of the PA initiative. The COR focuses on long-term solutions for the most challenging problems facing the community, such as violence, alcoholism, drug abuse, gangs, and youth homelessness. Biber (2014) described that the “COR is comprised of similar front-line workers [as the HUB] but will analyze the ‘bigger picture’ using trends and statistics gathered at the HUB level” (p. 3).

In the five years since the HUB and COR was established in PA there has been significant success. After the first year of the program there was nearly a “47 percent reduction in the number of missing persons filed [and a] 53 per cent reduction in assaults and 23 per cent reduction in property crimes” (de Souza, 2011, p. 3-4). Moreover, a 2015 Government of Saskatchewan press release highlighted the programs continued success, “since CMPA began operations the overall crime rate in Prince Albert has decreased by 21 per cent, the violent crime rate has decreased by 37 per cent, and the property crime rate is down 31 per cent” (p. 4).

**How Partnerships & Education would improve the VPSO Program**

Alaska’s VPSO program presents an opportunity to implement a community mobilization initiative similar to Prince Albert’s HUB and COR initiative because both programs were built off of the community orientated policing model. In addition, a limited number of VPSOs work with another VPSO or a city, tribal or village Police officer or are in a relatively close proximity to his or her oversight trooper from AST. This is highlighted by the fact that only five VPSOs work in a community that has a trooper stationed in it and two VPSOs work on islands that have a trooper post. Moreover, five VPSOs work as roving officers from larger communities as well. Most VPSOs than have little opportunity to speak with others in the law enforcement community or social services and to therefore deal with problems that are quite challenging. Partnerships would revolutionize the VPSO program by strengthening it and providing officers with more options in times of need. HUB meetings could be held at regional trooper hub locations via phone or videoconferences, which would help build upon and strengthen current partnerships for VPSOs. The five villages which are served by a VPSO and a trooper could hold HUB meetings in person and possibly the two VPSOs which have a trooper post on the same island as well. HUB meetings would than give the VPSO a feeling of connection to others and allow him or her to problem solve prior to certain situations reaching the point of an arrest being needed. In addition, HUB meetings could also illustrate to rural Alaskans people care (this is not to say AST or any VPSOs do not care and both do a tremendous job under the current circumstances), along with coordinating services for issues, such as substance abuse, delinquency, mental health, child welfare, and other issues. These collaborations could provide an opportunity for the oversight trooper to hear any concerns from villagers as well. The HUB would go a long way to change the current view of troopers in many parts of rural Alaska that is currently held, since “[t]he word “trooper,” according to [state trooper captain] Andrew Merrill [DPS VPSO program commander], translates in nearly every Native language in Western Alaska as ‘he who comes and takes away’. That’s what we’re seen as [Captain Merrill stated]” (Bernard, 2014, p. 12).

Lastly, the HUB would provide VPSOs the ability to problem solve via meetings that could be two-folds beneficial for VPSOs who are working in their home communities. Wood (2000) described officers “serving in their home villages were much more likely to remain VPSO’s” (p. 137). This could
translate into VPSOs being viewed as problem solvers to his or her fellow villager, since the HUB meetings could provide key points for intervention prior to the point that his or her fellow villager may possibly have to be arrested. Instead, the VPSO could be given more of a purpose and perhaps a drive to spearhead issues in their communities. Restorative justice practices should also be utilized for formulating solutions for at-risk individuals or families during HUB discussions. Restorative justice practices could build off Alaska Native customs (talking circles) that HUB members believe could possibly be used for dealing with alcohol or drug abuse in rural Alaska. HUB solutions would be required to be put into action to help the at-risk villager in 3 to 4 days, depending on weather, transportation, and other factors.

In rural areas of the state video conferencing could be used to bring villagers, VPSO officers, elders, social service providers and other key community stakeholders to the table to discuss possible issues or intervention points and to get to the roots of each individual’s issue (this could employ new broadband internet in the state, see DeMarban, 2013, February 05; Walsh, 2013). In addition, if a village that a VPSO is working in does not have many social service providers available to meet for monthly or weekly HUB meetings, depending on the number of villages that agree to participate in the HUB network. Than the social service providers that work in oversight trooper or roving VPSOs community could be tapped for support. The framework that will be used for formulating the makeup of each HUB throughout the VPSO program could align VPSOs with their oversight troopers to anchor the HUB video-conferences or conference call meetings. In addition, VPSOs could also regularly hold community HUB meetings after HUB meetings take place to keep villagers in the loop and discuss common issues that are brought up during HUB meetings, but without case details. Community HUB meetings would be able engage with all villagers and also help to stimulate conversations about issues such as substance abuse, domestic violence, suicide, child welfare issues and violent crime. Community HUB meetings would also be able to provide a VPSO with a link to what villagers think/feel should be done for the most at-risk villagers. In addition, the centers of responsibility (COR) could be headquartered on the Fairbanks, Anchorage, Kuskokwim, Nome, Kotzebue, Sitka, Ketchikan, Bethel, Dillingham and Juneau campuses of the University of Alaska, along with Ilisagvik College in Barrow to research long-term solutions for recurring issues that are brought up at HUB and community HUB meetings. Furthermore, long term COR solutions would be researched in coordination with what HUB and community HUB members feel would work best for their villages customs and traditions.

**Education and Training**

Alaska Native people’s traditions and customs must be part of any kind of HUB and COR initiative because Alaska Natives make up the majority of rural Alaska residents. Additionally, Alaska Natives are disproportionately affected by crime at higher rates than any other portion of the state’s population. Jarrett (fall 2012/winter 2013) highlighted the harsh realities for Alaska Native peoples in the state’s correctional system by stating that “36 percent of the offender population in 2011 [identify as] Alaska Native [, while Alaska Natives only made up 14.8% of the states total population according to the U.S Census’s estimate for 2010 thru 2015]” (p. 2). The history and customs of Alaska Native peoples should be taught to VPSO and AST at the DPS Training Academy in Sitka (especially for VPSO

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4 Restorative Justice as defined by Braithwaite (2004, p. 28) as “a process where all stakeholders affected by an injustice have an opportunity to discuss how they have been affected by the injustice and to decide what should be done to repair the harm. With crime, restorative justice is about the idea that because crime hurts, justice should heal”.

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oversight troopers and VPSO that are not from the village they will work/live in). Education would provide a basis for understanding Alaska Native people’s past and provide a better understanding of the issues occurring today. In addition, the state could also look at possibly expanding the Alaska Youth Academy (AYA) and the Law Enforcement Cadet Corps (LECC) program as well. Both programs focus on reaching out to rural Alaska youth and educating them on what it takes to work in law enforcement. In addition, expanding AYA and the LECC would also help boost rural Alaska recruitment efforts and strengthen the relationship for AST and VPSO with rural Alaskans. Furthermore, training at the state public safety academy should be offered in any of the state’s 20 official indigenous languages (Inupiaq, Siberian Yupik, Central Alaskan Yup’ik, Alutiiq, Unangan, Dena’ina, Deg Xinag, Holikachuk, Koyukon, Upper Kuskokwim, Gwich’in, Tanana, Upper Tanana, Tanacross, Han, Ahtna, Eyak, Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian) in addition to English to better communicate with Alaska Native peoples and connect with possible VPSO or AST Alaska Native candidates. In addition, the state could also look into what factors keep VPSO turnover rates lower in certain regions of the state and possibly replicate those factors in other regions that struggle with VPSO turnover issues. These improvements in education and training for VPSO and AST could go a long way to show Alaska Native peoples that their traditions and languages are valued and respected by law enforcement.

The state legislature in coordination with AST and DPS must make a serious investment into the VPSO program in regard to allowing VPSO grant funds to cover vacation and counselling services for traumatic events or to deal with stress. Additionally, the state should also look into increasing the amount of substance abuse, mental health, and battered women facilities across rural Alaska. Moreover, the state would also benefit from implementing a VPSO survey that could mirror that of Woods (2000) survey that was used to study VPSO turnover rates. The survey could be made up of 8 to 10 questions and be given every four years or so. The survey could cover; training, working conditions, frustrations, and how officers feel the program could be improved. Lastly, AST in cooperation with major local police departments across the state, such as Anchorage, Fairbanks, Juneau, Sitka, Ketchikan, Wasilla, Kenai, Kodiak, and Bethel among others should look into jointly establishing Alaska Native Relations Units or Integrated Alaska Native Units. The new units could be modelled off of the Edmonton Police Services Aboriginal Relations Unit or West Vancouver Police Department’s Integrated First Nations Unit.

To conclude, if the VPSO program implemented a similar type of initiative based on community mobilization Prince Albert’s HUB and COR initiative and built off of positive partnership and programs, such as tribal or therapeutic courts and talking circles that are already in place in rural Alaska villages, it would start a crucial dialogue that would provide VPSOs a link to connect with key village leaders, social service providers, mental health professionals, troopers, and educators to identify at risk villagers prior to more serious crimes or issues occurring. Partnerships would also strengthen the ties between the Alaska Native community and law enforcement. This would also provide a platform to help empower villagers to speak up and deal with issues that have been ravaging rural Alaska for far too long. Community mobilization, such as Prince Albert’s HUB and COR, would provide VPSOs with much needed help from villagers and social service providers in dealing with high crime rates as well as alcohol, suicide, and child welfare issues. Finally, it is hoped that a community mobilization initiative modelled on Prince Albert’s HUB and COR would provide villagers with a larger say in how rural justice is carried out in Alaska.
References


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