

Welcome to the NCJA Podcast. Listen to lively discussions with a variety of guests about promising criminal justice practices and programs worth taking a closer look at. Your interesting ideas from around the country on a variety of important and timely topics, and learn how you can adjust or adapt your Byrne JAG grant program for improved success. Thanks for joining us. We hope you enjoy.

Jessica Grisler:

Hello everyone and welcome to another episode of the NCJA podcast. Today we have a special guest, James Hoelscher, who will discuss Alaska's innovative approach to public safety, also known as the Village Public Safety Officer Program. So today we'll explore the significance and unique role of VPSOs and discuss how VPSOs have impacted public safety within rural communities throughout Alaska. So welcome, James. Thank you for joining us today. Would you just mind starting off by briefly introducing yourself?

James Hoelscher:

Thank you, Jessica. It's a pleasure to be here. My name's James Hoelscher and I currently serve as a director of the Village Public Safety Operations Division within the state of Alaska's Department of Public Safety. My Yup'ik name is Abukchok. My family is from Hooper Bay, a small Yup'ik community on the Bering Sea that has approximately 1300 people. I'm married, been with my wife for 32 years. I'm also a father of six, grandfather of two, soon to be three. I'm an avid hunter, fisherman and Alaska native artist. I've been in law enforcement in Alaska for just over 30 years. I served as a village certified police officer with the city of Hooper Bay for 15 years, a VPSO for six years, and the head of enforcement with alcohol and marijuana control for the state of Alaska for just about nine years afterwards.

Currently, I've been in my position as a director of the VPSO Division for approximately 10 months. All of this has contributed to my deep understanding of the complex public safety needs in rural Alaska. I feel like I have also had the opportunity to contribute significantly to policy developments and the expansion of public safety programs that directly impact our Alaska communities. Currently, in my position, I'm focused on enhancing and refining our division and the grantees programs to better serve Alaska's diverse and widespread rural populations. I'm absolutely excited to share insights on how the VPSO program operates, its crucial role in these communities and the unique challenges that we face.

Ensuring that every single Alaskan, no matter where they live, has access to vital public Safety services.

Jessica Grisler:

Thanks so much, James. What an impressive and diverse background you have. Quite the family man that you are. So you mentioned your experience being a VPSO and now you oversee this program. Can you explain just a little bit to our listeners about what a VPSO is and how the program came to be in Alaska?

James Hoelscher:

Yes, my pleasure. You are correct. I have served as a VPSO prior to taking my current role and overseeing the VPSO division. The Village Public Safety Officer program, or programs, I should say, respective programs for each one of the native organizations is unique to Alaska and it was created in 1979 to address specific public safety needs of rural and remote communities, many of which were among the 229 recognized federal tribes across Alaska. A VPSO is essentially a versatile public safety officer whose role is shaped by the unique needs of the communities that they serve, whether it's law enforcement, search and rescue, fire prevention, EMS services, or disaster response. A VPSO is there to fill the gap and provide critical services where they're needed the most.

The program was established in 1979 as a partnership between the Alaska Department of Public Safety and Alaska native organizations to ensure that even the most isolated communities in Alaska have access to essential public services. This role, the VPSO, is absolutely challenging. It requires adaptability and deep understanding of local culture and environment. Recently, the program was officially recognized as a division within the Department of Public Safety, highlighting the importance of the state's commitment to supporting and strengthening the programs across the state. The VPSO Division remains an essential part of our public safety infrastructure within the Department of Public Safety. It is continuously evolving to meet ever needing changes of the Alaska communities.

The Alaska native organizations that have VPSO programs in the regions are the Association of Village Council Presidents, AVCP, which is a regional native nonprofit organization that serves the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta Region, Tanana Chiefs Conference TCC, the regional native nonprofit organization that serves the interior of the Alaska region. Bristol Bay Native Association, BBNA, a regional native nonprofit organization that serves the Bristol Bay region. Kawerak Inc., a regional native nonprofit organization that serves the Bering Straits and Norton Sound region. Aleutian Pribilof Islands Association, APIA, a regional native nonprofit organization that serves Aleutian and Pribilof Islands. Chugachmiut, a regional native nonprofit organization that serves the Chugach region.

Northwest Arctic Borough, a borough that supports VPSO services in the Northwest Arctic region of Alaska. Central Counsel of the Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska, CCTHITA, tribal government organization that serves Southeast Alaska. The Copper River Native Association, CRNA, regional native nonprofit organization that serves the Copper River region. Kodiak Area Native Association, KANA is a regional native nonprofit organization that serves at Kodiak Archipelago region. These organizations and entities play a crucial role in the administration and the support of each one of their respective BPSO programs. They, in partnership with the Department of Public Safety, ensure that essential public safety services are available in rural and remote communities across Alaska.

Funding for these positions primarily comes from the state through appropriations made by the Alaska legislature. The Department of Public Safety administers these funds, which are then allocated to various regional native organizations that I had previously mentioned. These entities manage their own VPSO programs in their regions. These funds cover salaries, training, equipment, and other operational costs associated with maintaining their VPSO programs. In some cases, federal grants or other external funding sources may supplement state funding, particularly for specific initiatives or expansions of their respective programs. Again, these native organizations, boroughs, and tribal entities that oversee these VPSO programs in their areas work closely with the

Department of Public Safety to ensure that the funds are used effectively to meet the public safety needs of their communities.

A place that can qualify for a VPSO has to qualify as a village, which is currently defined as a community with a population of less than 2,500 people based off the most recent federal census. There has to be a memorandum of understanding between the state and the communities to say that they want a VPSO in their community. As of this year, current numbers are 140 communities have requested VPSO services. Of these, 57 communities are currently served by 74 VPSOs. While most of these communities have VPSOs stationed, some are served by roving officers. The need for roving officers came up due to several factors, primarily due to the lack of infrastructure such as permanent public safety building or adequate holding cells, the unavailability of housing for VPSOs within the community, and a shortage of qualified applicants.

However, these communities that do suffer from some of the problems of not receiving or having the ability to house a VPSO permanently, they can request VPSOs temporarily through a TDY agreement. The VPSOs can respond or be present in their community for large events as long as those communities are working closely with the native organizations to get that done ahead of time or scheduled ahead of time. I know that briefly touches on what a VPSO is and the places that they serve. If you have any further questions based off of anything that I brought up, I would greatly appreciate being able to elaborate.

Jessica Grisler:

That was so helpful, James. Thanks for going into detail and really for highlighting the importance of VPSO role within Alaskan communities. So you mentioned the law enforcement piece of a VPSO. Can you talk a little bit more about the other disciplines of VPSO covers and the specific training that they receive?

James Hoelscher:

Thank you, Jessica. VPSO training is very comprehensive and divided into several key components and across several communities across Alaska. Our law enforcement training occurs at the Department of Public Safety Academy in Sitka. It's held for over 9.5 weeks and conducted twice a year. Our EMS Search and Rescue and Fire Training takes place in Bethel at the Yuut Elitnaurviat, also known as a People's Learning Center. This training focuses on ETT, first aid, search and rescue coordination and rural fire protection specialist training.

In addition to those trainings, VPSOs are also required to complete a minimum of 40 hours of annual training, which includes legal updates, advanced techniques, and refreshes across all disciplines. This structure ensures that VPSOs are well-prepared and continuously updated to meet their public safety needs of rural Alaska and the communities that they serve.

Jessica Grisler:

Awesome, thank you. Wow. This role really is the definition of multidisciplinary. So I want to pivot a little bit and focus on the law enforcement part of this role. So we know that building relationships and trust is a crucial aspect of being a police officer. Can you talk a little bit about how VPSOs can help bridge the gap between communities and police? Are there any unique benefits of the VPSO program? And this is a couple questions in one, so feel free to answer one at a time, but I wanted to

also ask, so what does the VPSO program bring to communities that, say a police officer may struggle with?

James Hoelscher:

There's a lot to that, and what I can say, drawn from my experience, is that you need to be able to build relationships and trust. It's one of the most critical aspects of being a police officer anywhere, especially in some of the smaller Alaska native rural communities. I think VPSOs are uniquely positioned to bridge the gap between law enforcement and the communities they serve, simply because often they are from those communities that they are serving. That means that they're not just officers, they're neighbors, relatives, longstanding community members. This creates a deep personal connection that allows them to foster the trust in a way that might be a little more challenging for somebody that is from the outside as a police officer.

We often in law enforcement talk about community policing. In small Alaska native rural communities, we have no choice but to be a community-oriented police officer if we want to be successful. We have to listen to the needs of our people. We have to listen to the needs of everyone that we're serving. We need to hear what's not working, and we need to be able to change and adapt to apply what we think would be able to work within those specific communities. One of those key benefits of the VPSO program is absolutely to be able to understand and respect cultural aspects, values, traditions of those communities that they serve. Having that awareness is essential for building that trust.

For example, in situations that might require law enforcement, VPSO can approach a situation with an understanding of local customs and practices, which helps de-escalate tensions and resolve conflicts in a way that is both respectful and effective. In addition to that, VPSOs are not only trained in law enforcement, but they're also ETT. So they're EMS response, search and rescue, and fire protection. This multidisciplinary training allows them to wear many hats within their community, providing for a broader range of services that a typical police officer may not be able to. This versatility is invaluable to rural areas where resources are absolutely limited, and it means that VPSOs are not just seen as police officers, but as protectors and helpers rather than just enforcers of the law.

Another unique aspect to the VPSO program is its emphasis on preventative measures. Because VPSOs live in communities they serve, they're often more attuned to potential issues before they escalate. They can work proactively within communities with the community leaders to address concerns, educate residents, and build programs that prevent crime and enhance safety. This proactive community-centered approach is something that traditional law enforcement, which might only visit a village periodically, might struggle to achieve. Overall, VPSOs bring a level of trust, cultural understanding, a comprehensive service that is uniquely tailored to the needs of these Alaska rural communities.

This makes VPSOs not just an officer, but a critical member of the community, someone who contributes to the well-being and the safety of the people in a way that is deeply personal and effective.

Jessica Grisler:

I love that you brought up community policing specifically how in small Alaskan communities, this is essential. I also want to highlight something you said. VPSOs are seen as protectors and rather than just enforcers of the law, I think this piece is really, really important. So I just want to highlight that again. So you've talked about the benefits of the VPSO program and how this role can really support a community in times of crisis, especially when they lack resources. Can you discuss the challenges you've seen both from working in this role yourself, to now overseeing it on a large scale view?

James Hoelscher:

Those are a couple pretty difficult questions, but I guess the only thing I can possibly again do is draw from my personal experience as a VPSO in Hooper Bay that now serves as the director of the VPSO Division. I think that my perspective has broadened significantly because of that. So I can say in the field as a VPSO, the challenges were deeply personal. Enforcing laws among friends and family with a lot of isolation, working alone, having a huge range of responsibilities, not having any backup, having long shifts, working across holidays with no breaks, no days off. That caused a huge, immense stress, not only on me and many of the VPSOs out there, but also their families.

I can't begin to describe how it feels to have to arrest one of your brothers, your uncles, your aunts, your best friends. It is challenging. However, in an odd way, it's also comforting to know that if you are able to do that, then you know that you are applying that level of justice evenly across the board. And one of the benefits that I had when I took my job is in speaking to my family and letting them know that this was a challenge for me, and I know over time I would eventually have to deal with somebody in my family. And I told them I would treat them no different than I would treat a stranger, simply because that's what is expected of me, and that was a oath that I took.

Having that firsthand discussion, I think prompted them to know that I was going to do my job regardless of those relationships. And over the course of 21 years in Hooper Bay, I can say that I applied that standard evenly across that two decades of work. Now, when you talk about the stress and you talk about how much that affects you as an individual, I can also think back to where it also made me a little reclusive. I didn't want to go to anything outside of work. I tried not to go to public gatherings. I tried not to go to basketball games, and in all honesty, even my kids' graduation or holiday celebration events. It was very difficult for me to go to those things simply because no matter where I went, even absent of my uniform, when people saw me, I was viewed as the VPSO.

So no matter where I went, what that meant to me was I was going to be approached about work. And in those times where I was supposed to have that, I guess, breathing room on my time off, I didn't often have that. And for a short while there, I found myself kind of in an unhealthy situation where if I wasn't at work, I was out by myself or I was at home by myself when my family was out enjoying these events. Having recognized that in myself, recognized that I was going down a pretty unhealthy path of being withdrawn from my community, I started going out and participating a little bit more, teaching kids at the school about cultural heritage, carving masks, that type of thing, going to my kids' basketball games.

I started participating a little bit more and politely asking people if I wasn't at work to respect that, and if it was an emergency, then I would respond. So walking that line and being able to recognize that some of the stresses that were caused were taking an effect on me and my family and making



proactive steps, purposeful steps to improve on those things, I knew it meant not only a healthier me, but a healthier family. And having that perspective now as a director, I feel like there's a larger sense of responsibility, not just for those communities, but specifically for those VPSOs. I want to be able to ensure that their mental and physical well-being is paramount as I know that they are the backbone of our rural public safety efforts.

Balancing those community needs with the well-being of our officers requiring ongoing efforts, adaptability, and most importantly, the ability to recognize when something isn't working, making necessary adjustments to ensure the success for those VPSOs in those communities.

Jessica Grisler:

Thanks so much for sharing your personal experiences being a VPSO, James. I think it's helpful for listeners to really understand what goes into this role. So it sounds very complex, and while extremely rewarding, can take an extreme toll day in and day out, and really sounds like a balance has to be found. You also have a really unique position that you sit in because you've been in this role before. Is there any advice that you would give to say, a state agency that is trying to form or maybe strengthen relationships and in turn support their rural, tribal, or village communities? Where should they start or what are some of the key components to making this successful?

James Hoelscher:

Thank you, Jessica. We use the word relationship. When I hear the word relationship, to me that means an ongoing effort to improve communication for the betterment of everybody that's involved. And I would advise from my standpoint that in order to achieve a healthy relationship with rural, tribal, or village communities, in order to strengthen that relationship, they should start building trust. And part of that is if you say something, follow through with it. Demonstrate genuine respect for the community's cultures, values, and their needs. Not only listening, but applying what you are being asked to do. Listening to the community members, the tribal leaders, hearing their concerns and understanding their concerns, acknowledging that they're experts in these local matters.

That they know what their problems is in their community, that they know what they feel is best for them culturally and personally. I would say that taking that and applying some key components to be successful would be being culturally competent. They would need to learn about the community's culture, their history, and their traditions. They need to have collaboration, work alongside those communities, involve them in decision-making. There needs to be consistency. They need to maintain regular communication, and they need to follow through with their commitments. There also has to be flexibility. They need to be able to adapt to unique needs and dynamics of each one of those communities.

There has to be support, offer resources, assistance that align with the community's priorities and enhance their capacity to address these challenges. I think if anybody focuses on these areas, especially a state agency, they can start building a strong, meaningful partnership that leads to a long-lasting positive impact. Always keeping in mind that you can't effectively police a culture that you don't understand.

Jessica Grisler:

Thanks, James. A VPSO holds a really important position within Alaskan communities and building trust is part of what makes them so successful. You mentioned aligning with the specific community's needs. I'm curious, do VPSOs carry firearms? Can you talk a little bit more about what that looks like?

James Hoelscher:

So when programs were first established, the VPSOs were largely unarmed, which they still are for the most part, across Alaska. After a VPSO Tom Madole was killed in the line of duty, just over a decade ago. Alaska legislature passed a law allowing for VPSOs to have the opportunity to be armed, and they had to meet a certain criteria to be armed. In Alaska, only one VPSO program currently has armed VPSOs, and that's in the Northwest Arctic borough. Speaking from experience, as I stated before, I was a certified police officer. I was a chief of police in Hooper Bay. I carried a firearm as the chief of police. When I transitioned to a VPSO, I became unarmed.

And I was a VPSO, I became a sergeant and a first sergeant, and I had the benefit of knowing VPSO Tom Madole, I was one of his trainers. And after he passed away and they passed the law for VPSOs to be armed, I was one of two of the first VPSOs to go through that transition to become armed. Eventually after that training, I was the only armed VPSO in the state in Hooper Bay, and I was armed until I left and took the position with the state of Alaska Alcohol and Marijuana Control Office. I can discuss the nuances and differences all day long about VPSOs who have carried firearms and one who hasn't, and in the most simplest way I can say this is, the firearm is simply a tool for that VPSO to have access to if needed.

With the proper training, vetting, and application, I don't see that an armed VPSO is less approachable than an unarmed VPSO within those communities, and I speak this from my personal experience. When I transitioned to carrying a firearm that didn't create any divisiveness within my community, it actually had the opposite effect. The people from my community were proud that I had stepped up and I was the only VPSO in the state to be armed. There was a lot of pride in that, and because they knew me from that relationship that I had built up for all those years, they knew that it wouldn't be abused. So we go back to that core of what we talked about earlier with trust. And I think having that trust, that understanding and the backing of your communities is paramount when a VPSO program is moving to arm their VPSOs.

Jessica Grisler:

I feel like we could talk for hours about VPSOs and just the innovative approach that you all are taking to public safety, and thank you for explaining that and just for bringing your personal experiences into today's discussion. Is there anything else you want to mention about this program or anything you want listeners to know specifically about VPSOs before we wrap up today?

James Hoelscher:

Yes, absolutely. If anybody is interested, we have openings across the state of Alaska. All of our partners and native organizations are listed on the Department of Public Safety VPSO website. Each one of them has openings for VPSOs. If you meet the eligibility requirements, minimum requirements to be a VPSO, I would encourage anybody who wants to experience Alaska in its most

authentic form that wants to come out and serve communities in a public safety capacity, that in my opinion, is unmatched in the duties and responsibilities that a VPSO has.

I would encourage that you look at the website, you look at what openings are there. And if there's any questions that anyone has regarding what it is or what it might be like to be a VPSO, I know that in each one of these regions, every single one of the VPSO coordinators is more than happy to answer those questions.

Jessica Grisler:

Thank you so much for being on the NCJA Podcast, James. And I also want to thank you just for your role in strengthening public safety in Alaska. This has been an incredibly insightful conversation, and I'm really, really excited to see how the VPSO program will continue to expand in the future. So thank you for being on with us today and just awesome work that you all are doing in Alaska.

James Hoelscher:

Thank you, Jessica. I really appreciate that. I appreciate the opportunity to share a little bit about the VPSO programs, our division. As you said earlier, I also feel like we could talk many hours about what VPSOs do, what they have done, and maybe the direction that we're heading. It's definitely a challenging position, but I also know it's rewarding. And I can see the direct effects that VPSOs have in their communities, from saving lives to putting out fires. Just being community members that are active, that are trusted. I look forward to many years of being able to do this job. And I appreciate, again, the opportunity for you allowing me to share some of this with the audience.