

# VPSOs are the first line of support



## news from the CAPITAL

by Sen. John Binkley  
for the Tundra Times

JUNEAU — Last week 16 Alaskans demonstrated their desire to serve their communities by completing and graduating from the Village Public Safety Officers Academy in Sitka.

All of us should be proud of these individuals who have shown a willingness to improve the quality of life in rural Alaska.

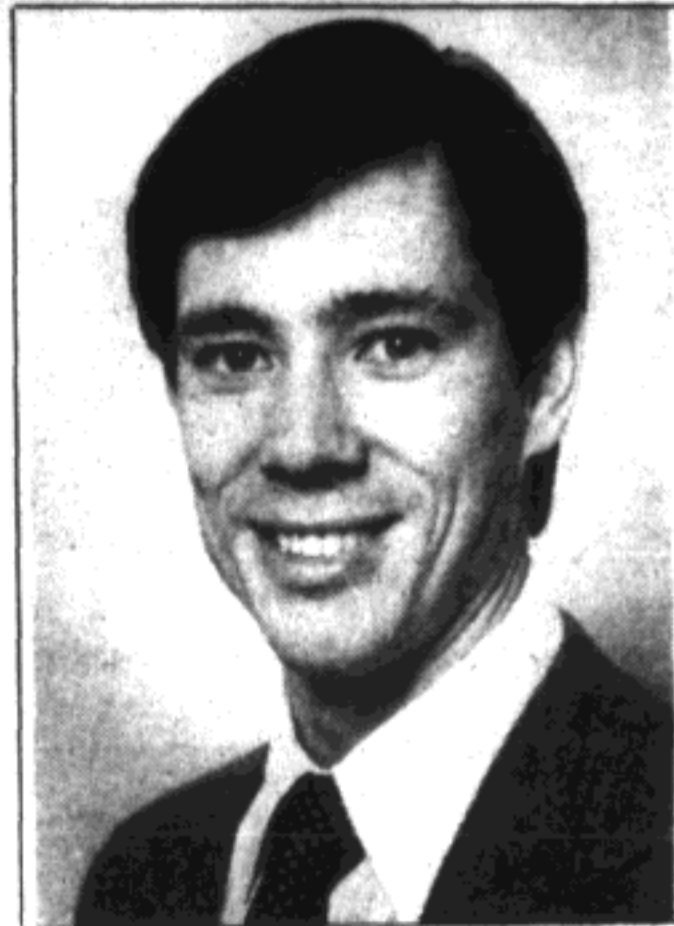
To do so, they had to complete a rugged six-week course that included not only law enforcement, but also emergency medical training, search and rescue coordination, water and fire safety and the development of local ordinances.

To be a VPSO is often a tough job. You're on call 24 hours a day and expected to take the lead during emergencies. You're responsible for enforcing the law fairly for everyone. This sometimes means even enforcing laws you might not personally agree with, and sometimes it means enforcing laws that are being broken by friends or family members.

That's not an easy job for anyone, but it's especially tough in small communities.

That's why VPSOs need the support of the entire community. After all, as Eileen Lohmer, VPSO in Ruby, told me, "We're only human, too."

Nobody likes to be the "bad guy" all the time, so it's important to realize that the VPSO is there to "do good,"



to help the entire community.

The VPSO has lately been taking on some new duties. As local village governments look for ways to better take charge of their lives, developing alternative programs to the formal justice system is a natural. The VPSO is now expected to help with that.

That's a tall order for any one individual. But rural Alaska is grateful that we have this program in place.

In 1979 there were no VPSOs, and rural Alaska had the distinction of having the worst record for public safety of any of the 50 states.

For its population size, Alaska had:  
•The highest loss of life and property due to accidental fires.

•Suffered the highest loss of life due to boating and water-related accidents.

•Led the country in the number of search and rescue missions.

•Had the least local government resources to deal with all of these public safety problems.

That's why the Alaska State Troopers and a number of federal, state and regional agencies got together with Native nonprofit corporations to establish in the early 1980s what has become the Village

emergencies, felony cases and misdemeanors. But we don't have a trooper in every village, and weather and transportation problems can often delay their arrival, so it's especially helpful to have trained individuals available to immediately respond to local needs.

In fact, having such immediate response can often help cool down tempers and volatile situations before they end in violence. Counseling and intervention can often work wonders.

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Troopers still have the ultimate responsibility for law enforcement in rural areas. And they try to be on the scene as quickly as possible during

VPSOs have been especially helpful to the community health aides. Since these aides provide daily health care to village residents, VPSOs can often respond to emergency medical situations.

The VPSO motto is "First Responders — Last Frontier." As 18 additional graduates join this first line of support and assistance to rural communities, let's give all VPSOs our heartiest congratulations for a job well done!