

Village officer program expanded

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The two-year-old Village Public Safety Officer program has met with such success since the program's inception that the number of VPSO officers was doubled in this year.

The VPSO program last year had officers in 56 villages, according to Alaska State Trooper Sgt. Ron Cole, who said that number has been expanded to 104 this year.

The state legislature voted this year to double the amount of money the program receives, bringing it from \$2.9 million to \$6.5 million.

Cole said the program has been very well received by all concerned.

"I say that based on comments we have received from the non-profits (corporations), the villages, the mayors' conference and other agencies, telling us we are doing a good job."

The program was founded two years ago to provide the remote villages of the state with a trained safety officer.

The officers who participate in the program are chosen by their villages and sent for training in the state troopers training program in Sitka. They also receive extensive fire fighting training in Anchorage and receive emergency medical training in Anchorage.

"When they get done, they are certified emergency medical technician and a certified rural fire fighter."

Each VPSO is paid for with state funding that is administered through the non-profit Native corporation in his or her areas. The VPSO officers are trained by the troopers but they report to their village leader, says Cole, so they have village support for the VPSOs.

The officers also receive monthly supplementary training when training officers travel to the villages to provide instructional materials, said Cole.

In addition to extensive advance and on-the-job training, each VPSO works on a one-to-one basis with a regular Alaska State Trooper so he has someone to contact if a problem arises or the VPSO needs guidance.

The VPSOs are chosen by their village leaders, and although there was a problem of people dropping out at first, Cole said all the recent VPSO nominations have stuck with the

program. The selection process is very careful, said Cole, because the village leaders are aware of the importance of the person they chose.

"They select people they feel will accomplish something .. not someone who is just looking for a job."

The advantage of having a VPSO drawn from the village that the officer will work in is that "they know the problems in the village ... They can see these things coming. Before we just picked up the pieces," said Cole.

He added that the officers have helped to revitalize the fire departments in several villages and through the VPSO program, some 900 fire extinguishers have been distributed to the villages.

The safety officers also have conducted fire training and fire prevention programs in village schools, said Cole.

"There's no doubt about it. I'm sold on the program," he said.

He said the officers have proven themselves numerous times and cited the instance of Howard Amos of Mekoryuk on Nunivak Island who was called to the scene of a shooting only three weeks after he had completed training and was assigned to the village.

The victim was his sister who had been shot by an ex-boyfriend.

Because of the training Amos received, he was able to do emergency medical treatment on the woman and cared for her until she was "medivaced" to Bethel. Because of the care Amos gave her, she lived, said Cole. Otherwise, she probably wouldn't have, he said.

Another officer was able to perform the Heimlich Maneuver on his daughter who was choking. The maneuver, which is becoming more widely known throughout the country, is one of the few ways of safely removing a food substance lodged in a person's throat. Because the officer learned the technique in his medical training class, his little girl lived.

VPSO officers are stationed in the AVCP villages, and villages in the Mauneluk, Kawerak, Kodiak, APIA, Tlingit-Haida, Bristol Bay, Tanana Chiefs Conference non-profit regions.