



Residents of the Northwest Arctic Borough sing a welcoming song to visitors attending the Law Enforcement Conference in Kotzebue.

# DPS PARTICIPATES IN KOTZEBUE CONFERENCE

BY BETH IPSEN, PIO

Commissioner Walt Monegan and the upper echelon of Alaska State Troopers, Alaska Wildlife Troopers, the Division of Fire and Life Safety and the Alcohol Beverage Control Board traveled to Kotzebue Aug. 14-16 to participate in the Law Enforcement Conference.

The two-day conference addressed concerns with the Village Public Safety Officer program statewide and public safety and law enforcement in the Northwest Arctic Borough, which is governed out of Kotzebue.

The conference gave DPS, VPSO non-profit contractors and local citizens a chance to interact face-to-face and air out concerns regarding public safety.

Those from DPS were braced for a barrage of concerns from local residents, but instead were met mostly with positive remarks and a willingness to cooperate to strengthen public safety in the region, as well as the VPSO program across the state.

The fact that the commissioner personally made the trip was not lost on local residents.

“If he weren’t committed to Rural Alaska, he wouldn’t be here today,” Borough Mayor



AWT Maj. Steve Bear listens as Northwest Arctic Borough Assembly President Walter Sampson talks to others in their group during the conference. Attendees broke into groups to come up with ideas for improving statewide law enforcement services in rural Alaska.



C Detachment Commander Capt. Steve Arlow gives a presentation on the largest detachment in the state.

Siikauraq Martha Whiting said during her opening remarks. Whiting has been in office just less than a year, but has pledged to address concerns with law enforcement in the region.

Commissioner Monegan gave opening remarks at the conference, handed out certificates and took time to do a radio interview with Sen. Donny Olson, D-Nome, and Rep. Reggie Joule, D-Kotzebue, while in Kotzebue.

Col. Audie Holloway, Col. Gary Folger, Maj. John Glick, Maj. Steve Bear, Capt. Steve Arlow and Steve Schreck, a fire training specialist with Fire and Life Safety also represented DPS at the conference. Arlow gave a presentation on C Detachment and Glick presented information regarding the VPSO program. The Northwest Arctic falls within C Detachment, the largest

detachment in the state.

During the trip to the Northwest Arctic, Holloway, Glick, Arlow, Sgt. Karl Main, supervisor of the Kotzebue post, and AWT pilot Sgt. Scott Quist went on a aerial tour of some of the villages in the area. The group landed in Shungnak where they looked at potential housing for a VPSO and talked to village residents.

The VPSO program was the main focus of the two-day event.

The program was developed in 1979 and implemented in 1981 to broadly train one person in all aspects of public safety – law enforcement, water safety, fire service, emergency medical service, search and rescue and village ordinances.

The program started with 52 positions throughout the state and eventually expanded



Commissioner Walt Monegan, left, and Sen. Donny Olson, D-Nome, listen as Rep. Reggie Joule, D-Kotzebue, talks during a live radio show at KOTZ radio station in Kotzebue. Station Manager Suzy Erlich conducts the interview.

to as many as 125 at one time. However, due to budget cuts, that number reduced back down to 51. At the time of the conference, three of those positions were vacant.

In order for a village to field a VPSO, the village governmental entity has to agree to support the program by providing housing and office space with a phone line

In the Northwest Arctic Region, only two of the five VPSO positions are staffed, leaving troopers at the Kotzebue post to be the first line of law enforcement in eight villages in the region. Kotzebue is served by its own police department.

One of the main concerns, besides finding people to fill the VPSOs slots, was tapping into federal money for the statewide program. Funding for the VPSOs originally comes from state legislature. From there, the money is given to the Department of Public Safety then passed on to the six non-profit regional corporations who manage the VPSOs in certain regions.

The Kodiak Area Native Association, or KANA, took over the VPSO program in the Northwest Arctic after the NANA Corp.-affiliated Manillaq Manpower closed its doors in 2004.

Other non-profits that manage the VPSOs are Kawarak Inc., Bristol Bay Native Association, Association of Village Councils presidents out of the Bethel region, Tanana Chief Conference for the Interior and the Aleutian-Pribilof Island Association. Four of the

six non-profit contractors had representatives at the conference. The Copper River Native Association sent two representatives to gather information on how they can place VPSOs in some of the 22 villages within its region.

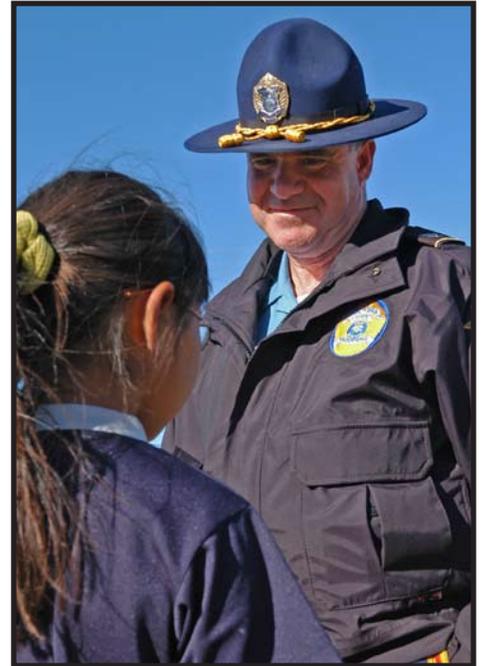
“Our costs have gone up and wages have increased, but our state appropriations for the VPSO program has remained virtually the same year after year for the last seven years,” said Jim Knope, VPSO coordinator for Tanana Chief Conference.

However, there was confusion at the conference about how to tap into the federal Indian Health Service’s funds, something DPS has been told cannot be done due to strict guidelines.

“We want to have more VPSOs, we want to access that \$6 million. IHS keeps telling us no,” Holloway said. “If we can’t get the people and applicants, we can’t get the money . . . We want to do this, just as bad as you do. It’s a problem with the rules that IHS has set.”

Knope said finding qualified applicants has become harder since 9/11 as more people consider military duty as a more attractive option.

Alvin Jimmie Sr., VPSO coordinator for AVCP, explained VPSO’s job description as enforcing state and federal laws, report writing, emergency trauma treatment, assisting health aides and maintaining and organizing a fire department and its equipment. VPSOs also serve court documents, monitor probations and



AST Col. Audie Holloway talks to a local girl during a trip to Shungnak.

paroles, coordinate disaster response and most importantly, do community policing. It’s a tall order for one person that works 7.5 hours per day and 37.5 hours per week but is on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

“That expectation is so high for the VPSOs, they are overwhelmed,” Jimmie said.

According to a UAA Justice Center study released in 2000, the turnover rate for VPSOs



Northwest Arctic Borough residents fill up their plates with a variety of local food including mukluk (bowhead whale) and sussauni (beluga whale) at a potluck put on at the end of the first day of the conference.



**DPS Commissioner Walt Monegan talks to the crowd attending the Law Enforcement Conference.**

is 36 percent per year, a much higher number than anywhere else in the public safety sector. The study lists stress, low pay, poor benefits, lack of equipment and a sense of alienation in a community as some of the causes of the high turnover.

After the presentations, conference attendees broke into groups to come up with recommendations for improving statewide law enforcement services in rural Alaska.

Those attending the conference struggled with finding a way to solve the problem of VPSO retention, a major component in improving public safety in the Bush.

Lorretta Bullard of Kawarak Inc. was the first to give a presentation at the conference with an overview of the Alaska Rural Justice and Law Enforcement Commission report that was completed in 2006.

The commission was created by congress in 2004 to study four broad areas related to rural Alaska: law enforcement, judicial systems, alcohol importation and drug interdiction.

The commission used four workgroups of professionals, experts and officials working in the fields addressing those four broad areas. The commission took the information from the workgroups and came up with 100 suggestions to funnel into nine general recommendations.

For example, one recommendation was to persuade legislature to ban plastic bottles, making it harder to bootleg alcohol to rural Alaska, Bullard said.

Other possible solutions included broadening therapeutic efforts by putting long-term residential care facilities in rural hubs such as Kotzebue and greater use of tribal courts to

address local problems.

According to Bullard, the commission believes the recommendations contained in the initial report can improve access to the justice system and in turn improve life in rural Alaska by supporting healthy families and communities.

Bullard said many of the suggestions the working groups made require changes to state law.

The report can be found at [www.akjusticecommission.org](http://www.akjusticecommission.org)

Doug Griffin, director of the Alcoholic Beverage Control Board, gave a presentation

toward the end of the two-day conference explaining a pilot program that will create community delivery sites in damp towns. Barrow, Fort Yukon and St. Mary's are operating the Community Delivery Sites that are controlled by the local governments.

Griffin described the ABC Board, and how the board's role will change from strictly dealing with alcohol licenses to regulating the sale of alcohol with Senate Bill 128. The bill would add a position to the five-member board. The bill intends to create some oversight into a program that allows people in rural Alaska to order from packaged stores. The bill creates a list of stipulations, such as limits on the amount of alcohol a person can order, that helps monitor the program and helps ensure the alcohol doesn't wind up in the hands of those who abuse alcohol.

The distribution centers also use a database to maintain a person's name along with a person's alcoholic beverage buying habits and whether the resident has been court ordered to stay away from alcohol.

Lauren Rice, the legislative liaison to the commissioner, and Katie TePas, the program coordinator for state domestic violence training, also made the trip to Kotzebue for the conference. Beth Ipsen and Justin Freeman, from the Public Information Office, were there to record the conference on video and on paper. Freeman also went on the village tour.

In the end, people left the conference feeling bonds had been forged in an effort to work together to solve the difficult task of keeping people safe in rural Alaska. ■



**Village Public Safety Officers John Peratrovich of Savoonga, left, and Otis Rolls of Kobuk, listen to others in their work group.**