



Beacons of Light

Village Public Safety Officer Program Adds 20 To Ranks With Eye On More Growth

Photos and story by Beth Ipsen, PIO



The following is a list of VPSOs who successfully completed the program, their employers and assigned village:

- Amil Burns** – Northwest Arctic Borough – Noatak
- Jim Cedeno** – Kodiak Area Native Association – Old Harbor
- Barret Eningowuk** – Kawerak, Inc. – Shishmaref
- John Grady** – Tanana Chiefs Conference – McGrath
- Jerome Kelly** – Association of Village Council Presidents – Quinhagak
- Fred Lamont Jr.** – Association of Village Council Presidents – St. Mary's
- James Lolley Jr.** – Chugachmiut – Chenega Bay
- Rachel Nelson** – Association of Village Council Presidents – Kwigillingok
- Reuben Norman** – Chugachmiut – Port Graham
- Joseph Okitkun** – Association of Village Council Presidents – Kotlik
- Jen-Ray Pavageau** – Aleutian Pribilof Islands Association – Akutan
- Robert Pitka** – Association of Village Council Presidents – Aniak
- Philip Plessinger** – Tanana Chiefs Conference – Ruby
- Jonathan Russell** – Association of Village Council Presidents – Aniak (roving)
- John Samuel** – Association of Village Council Presidents – Platinum
- Jonathan Shivel** – Kawerak, Inc. – Savoonga
- Speridon Simeonoff Jr.** – Kodiak Area Native Association – Akhiok
- Donald Tritt** – Tanana Chiefs Conference – Chalkyitsik
- Jason Turk** – Northwest Arctic Borough – Kiana
- John Uttereyuk** – Association of Village Council Presidents – Scammon Bay

When 20 Village Public Safety Officers took the oath of office on March 11, they became the newest members of a team of public safety professionals to dedicate themselves to serving Alaskans in the farthest reaches of the state.

That oath carries with it a great weight of responsibility. In many villages, they will be not only the first line of public safety, but the only public safety presence. As VPSO coordinator, Alaska State Trooper Sgt. Leonard Wallner pointed out during the graduation ceremony in Sitka, the duties may bring "pain, ridicule and many a sleepless night. Some of your friends will turn their backs on you. Some of you will have to arrest family members and friends. Some of you will be involved in the investigation of tragic events."

But Wallner, who oversees the

Village Public Safety Officers take the oath of office at the end of their graduation ceremony in Sitka Friday afternoon.



program that now has 79 VPSOs, said the position comes with the reward by being a source of “strength for the defenseless ... an advocate for the victim.”

“You will protect your community from the horrors of bootlegging and homebrew,” Wallner said. “You will be the anchor of stability.”

It is for those reasons that James Lolley Jr. became a VPSO. Lolley has experience working as a patrol officer at a small police department in Maine, where his father currently lives and from where traveled to attend his son’s graduation. The VPSO program offered Lolley a chance to get back into law enforcement and work in Alaska where his mother lives.

“My wife and I decided what better way to serve the communities of Alaska than to serve the rural communities that really need more help than the road system,” Lolley said.

Lolley will be heading to Chenega Bay, a village he has never seen. He talked to village council members and a lodge owner before deciding to choose the Prince William Sound community as his new home and duty post. He said once he sets up shop on the Evans Island village, he’ll be the first full-time public safety presence there in five years.

In communities associated with the VPSO program, citizens are afforded immediate response to all emergencies without delays caused by weather or distance. They act as first responders to public

safety emergencies such as search and rescue, fire protection, emergency medical assistance and law enforcement support. Although VPSOs are not expected to handle high risk or complex investigative situations, they do act as a valuable communications link and asset for troopers. Their immediate action, as directed by an oversight trooper, can resolve many potentially volatile situations and often protect important evidence until troopers arrive. Studies have shown the presence of these officers has had a significant impact on improving the quality of life in the participating villages.

The effort to increase VPSOs’ presence in villages has been an important part of Gov. Sean Parnell’s public safety initiative, “Safe Homes, Strong Families.” There are 86 funded positions with plans to increase that number to 101 by July. The initiative aims to boost the number of VPSO positions by 15 each year for the next 10 years. Some of those supporters were present and spoke at the graduation – Sen. Donny Olsen, D-Nome; John Moller, Parnell’s senior advisor of rural affairs; and Department of Public Safety Commissioner Joseph Masters. Masters wore a VPSO uniform early in his career in law enforcement.

The goal is to put VPSOs in every one of the villages that wants one. The program was also designed to facilitate local control over public safety services. Management authority actually resides with three entities: the village itself, 10 regional nonprofit Native corporations and the Alaska State Troopers.



On left, Alvin Jimmie, VPSO coordinator for the Association of Village Council Presidents, congratulates one of his VPSOs, John Uttereyuk on a job well done.



Ingrid Charlie pins the Village Public Safety Officer badge on new VPSO Rachel Nelson after she graduated from the Public Safety Academy in Sitka Friday afternoon while her daughters Phillicia, on the left, and May, watch.

Guymon before naming VPSO John Grady as class valedictorian.

Scammon Bay VPSO and the class honor graduate, John Uttereyuk, said that togetherness made his second time through the training easier.

Uttereyuk took a 7-1/2 year hiatus from the program. What pulled him back was he felt the need to do something in light of a rash of suicides in his village. The most recent one in summer was especially hard on him, partially because he was already wearing the brown VPSO uniform and was waiting to go to the academy. He hopes he can take his training and make a difference in the village where he grew up.

“Coming here with an empty cup and having it refilled with the way it’s supposed to be done in law enforcement helps you deal with issues,” he said.

The almost eight years of maturity helped in getting him through the academy this time around.

“I saw less of the floor,” he said. “I didn’t do as many pushups.”

Funding for the VPSO Program is provided by the legislature and managed by the Alaska State Troopers.

VPSOs don’t carry a firearm, which is unique to Alaska, but are equipped with other defensive mechanisms such as OC spray and a Tazer. And just like others who go through training at the Public Safety Academy, all VPSOs are sprayed in the face with OC and Tazed.

VPSO recruits received 10 weeks of extensive training at the academy starting on Jan. 3. The curriculum spans 37 separate subjects and includes 488 classroom hours of intensified instruction and testing before a student may graduate. For example, 94 hours of training were dedicated to fire training.

This class of graduates was not only the largest class in recent history, they also had the highest success rate. Only four did not complete the training with two succumbing to injuries with plans on returning for the next academy. Of the 20 VPSO recruits that attended the Public Safety Academy in Sitka in 2010, only 12 graduated. In 2009, only 11 of the 19 that started graduated. In 2008, that number was five of the 11 that graduated. To combat the high drop-out rate, DPS implemented modified medical screening practices to improve the graduation rate.

In addition, this class was the most cohesive group of VPSOs to go through the academy.

“This class, in many ways, has raised the bar for classes to come,” said Instructor Cpl. Michael

On left, Sgt. Leonard Wallner, VPSO coordinator, gives some last minute instructions to graduating VPSOs, from left, Jen-Raye Pavageau; Reuben Norman; James Lolley Jr.; John Grady; and Jonathan Russell.

Class honors:
 Physical Fitness – **Jerome Kelly**
 Defensive Tactics – **Reuben Norman**
 Fire Service Award – **John Uttereyuk**
 Valedictorian – **John Grady**
 Honor Graduate – **John Uttereyuk**

