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DPS PR #15-005

Three Village Public Safety Officers Selected For VPSO Arming Pilot Project

(SITKA, Alaska) – Three Village Public Safety Officers were selected to participate in the VPSO Arming Pilot Project training set to begin on March 15 at the [Public Safety Training Academy](#) in Sitka. The Arming Pilot Project training qualifications and requirements were designed by the nine Native non-profit organizations and the Northwest Arctic Borough that participate in the VPSO grant program in partnership with the Alaska State Troopers, VPSO Program, training academy and other entities. The established requirements were designed to ensure that VPSOs who would be armed met a minimum level of qualifications to participate. To qualify and be selected, the VPSOs had to pass a physical fitness test consisting of sit-ups, push-ups and a 1.5 mile run like troopers take and had to score the minimum score a trooper applicant must make to enter into the hiring process. Pilot project VPSOs must be currently certified VPSOs and also had to participate in and complete an in-depth background review, and undergo a psychological evaluation composed of written tests, and in person interviews. A review board consisting of the academy commander, recruitment lieutenant, and VPSO commander then reviewed the backgrounds and psychological evaluations and provided recommendations to AST Director Col. James Cockrell for final selection.

Four of the 10 VPSO program grantees – the Bristol Bay Native Association (BBNA), the Association of Village Council Presidents (AVCP), Tanana Chiefs Conference (TCC), and Northwest Arctic Borough (NWAB) – chose to participate in the arming pilot project. From those four grantee organizations 21 VPSOs initially showed interest in taking part in the project. There were a multitude of reasons why many of these VPSOs chose not to participate ranging from not being able to complete the physical fitness requirements, to deciding that being armed was a responsibility they did not want at this time. Some candidates had concerns with the consequences of using deadly force within the community, especially for VPSOs who have family living in the village where they work.

The VPSOs that were selected are:

1st Sgt. James Hoelscher of Hooper Bay (AVCP)
Sgt. Philip Plessinger, a Fairbanks Rover (TCC)
Cpl. Michael Gagliano of Noatak (NWAB)

They will undergo approximately 144 hours of instruction on a variety of topics including at least 60 hours of handgun training in order to be armed while performing their duties as first responders in their assigned villages. In addition to the firearms training, the three VPSOs will receive instruction on defensive tactics, weapon retention, professional police communication, officer survival, scenario, and judgment training, ethics and use of force. The VPSOs already received nearly [500 hours of instruction](#) at the VPSO academy. [Certified VPSOs](#) already carry and are trained on how to use the baton, OC spray, and taser. Firearms and equipment were purchased and will be provided by DPS.

While at the academy, the arming pilot project VPSOs will train in some of the same [Alaska Police Standards Council](#) certified Alaska Law Enforcement Training (ALET) courses as the current class of state troopers, municipal law enforcement officers, and VPSOs of ALET 15-01 as well as receiving specifically adapted courses designed for the pilot

project VPSOs. For the first time in the almost 40-year history of the Village Public Safety Officer Program, nine VPSOs are attending the 15-week ALET in Sitka alongside state and municipal officers. VPSOs graduating ALET on June 5 will not be immediately certified to carry firearms in the course of their duties. Instead, they will have the opportunity to be armed once they fulfill the VPSO certification requirements of being employed as a VPSO for one year and meet the minimum arming standards of passing a physical fitness test, psychological evaluation, and background requirements.

The [VPSO Program](#) was started in the late 1970s to train and employ individuals residing in the village as first responders to public safety emergencies such as search and rescue, fire protection, emergency medical assistance, crime prevention, and basic law enforcement.

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Click on links for additional information including the [Alaska Administrative Code](#) for the Village Public Safety Officer Program.