



## **Increasing Public Safety Across Alaska**

Public safety is a right for every individual and a constitutional requirement for our state government to provide to the citizens of Alaska. However, this is not the case for our rural communities and especially Indigenous women in rural and urban Alaska. Only one in three villages have a public safety officer, and many times when a crime is committed it can take many hours to days for a state trooper to respond. The current Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) program has struggled with funding, including millions of dollars in cuts in past years. Other obstacles for VPSOs include lack of housing, support and training.

While funding and filling positions across the state is one step toward improving public safety in Alaska, there are additional aspects and resources that must accompany in order to truly transform our public safety system including housing for our VPSOs, securing pilots, planes, ATVs, etc. in order to access our remote villages, improving our outdated 911 system, adding additional special investigators to solve cold cases and address the high rates of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls/missing and murdered Indigenous persons, improve the data systems that allow our public safety officials to share information.

The Indigenous voices in our state government is minimal, at best. Many of our policy makers and decision makers in our state government live in urban centers and have not had direct experience with the public safety issues currently experienced in rural Alaska. Alaskans, and especially rural Alaskans, continue to experience inadequate funding and resources across the state. The state needs to do better by developing meaningful partnerships with Tribes and non-profits. We have seen our Tribes carry out many successful programs, including public safety programs and Tribal Courts.

It us up to our communities, Tribes and Indigenous non-profits to continue to reach out and share experiences regarding the lack of action to protect people living in rural Alaska. Native Peoples Action is dedicated to sharing information, advocating for the needed changes in our state, and connecting with our communities. In order to make the needed changes in our state we need to work together and be a united voice and hold everyone accountable.

## **Outdated 911 System detrimental to Rural Alaska Safety**

An overhaul of the inadequate and outdated 911 system is severely needed. Alaska's state 911 system is roughly 30 years behind other states and one of three states without a unified system. Among the flaws of the system, emergency calls from cell phones do not track caller locations throughout most of the state, as they do in Anchorage or in much of the lower 48. Roughly 80 percent of the 911 calls come from cell phones. Many villages depend on landline phones and must dial 1-800 numbers to reach troopers, instead of 911. In emergency situations, long 11-digit numbers may be hard to remember, especially for children. Other times individuals have been transferred to different law enforcement posts or reaching an answering machine.



State officials have stated that a plan to modernize the Alaska's archaic 911 system could have prevented tragedies like the death of a Bethel man who went missing in November 2018.<sup>1</sup>

Native Peoples Action staff have been meeting regularly with government staff in the Department of Public Safety, Governor's Office and Legislature to talk about this huge public safety gap – working to find out how to update and fund an updated 911 system, identify barriers, etc. We need more people across the state to continue to talk about this to bring more attention and pressure to make our public safety in Alaska serve our residents better.

### **Village Public Safety Officers**

Only one in three villages have a public safety officer. Alaska continues to shamefully rank highest for rates of domestic violence, assault and missing and murdered Indigenous women in the Nation. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention has reported that murder is the third-leading cause of death among American Indian and Alaska Native women and that rates of violence on reservations and rural areas can be up to ten times higher than the national average.

As we talk with people in communities across Alaska, we are overwhelmed by the expressed concerns for life and safety, and the testimonies of rural residents who had to wait hours, and in some cases up to days for troopers to respond to distress calls. It has been up to community members without any formal safety and mediation training to police others and respond to calls of distress putting themselves at great risk as well – this is not a system that serves us well and we demand better.

A better system includes working more closely with our Tribal governments, building up and truly supporting our Village Public Safety Officers by providing adequate funding and removing barriers that exist that currently hinder this program from protecting Alaskans. We know there are recruitment and retention issues for public safety officers across Alaska, as acknowledged in recent years by former Commissioner Walt Monegan and again by current Commissioner James Cockrell. Multiple reasons have been listed that are preventing successful officer recruitment and retention, including but not limited to salary and benefit packages. While we understand the challenge of balancing a budget and eliminating the deficit, we also know that the solution is not to cut funding for public safety. There are times when investments need to be made for the greater good, and this is one of those times. All options and out of the box solutions should be on the table.

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<sup>1</sup> In the Anchorage Daily News in April 2018 – Alaska's 911 System is 30 years outdated and risking lives, state officials say (<https://www.adn.com/alaska-news/crime-courts/2018/04/10/alaskas-911-system-is-30-years-outdated-and-risking-lives-state-officials-say/>)



Native Peoples Action is supportive of the efforts made by the VPSO Working Group who presented a report with substantive policy recommendations related to the VPSO program.<sup>2</sup> This working group was assigned to coordinate with stakeholders to examine the underlying causes of the recruitment and retention obstacle and provide proposals to turn around the epidemic rate of personnel turnover within the VPSO program. The working group held meetings, attended community meetings, participated in listening sessions, and worked with stakeholders to arrive at the proposals outlined in their report. The proposals primarily address the core problem of increasing the number of VPSO's available to communities. The recommendations are currently included in Senate Bill 81 which is currently being considered in the Alaska Legislature.

### **Effecting Change and Being an Advocate**

In order to effect change, we need to have the public involved and informed. This takes a multi-pronged approach to disseminating information on how and when to get involved in the legislative process, how to make your voice heard and at the most effective time. It is also about ensuring the information is available on what is happening. We all have busy family and work lives, in addition, to hunting, fishing and providing for our families. There needs to be an easier way to get information, NPA can help fill that information gap through our robust communications plan targeted towards how to influence the legislature on public safety.

One of the most important aspects is to ensure that we are representing our communities and learning from them what their needs and wants are. The communications must work both ways, reaching out to the community, in addition to providing information. In order for us to be a good advocate, we need to understand specific issues so we can bring that message to our decision makers.

Please reach out to NPA staff anytime to share your story, ask about resources, or offer ideas – you can reach us at [info@nativepeoplesaction.org](mailto:info@nativepeoplesaction.org) or call us at 907-917-0854. You can also follow us on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter for continued updates on our efforts, calls to action, and events.

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<sup>2</sup> VPSO Working Group Report Recommendations and Findings.  
[http://www.akleg.gov/basis/get\\_documents.asp?session=32&docid=14839](http://www.akleg.gov/basis/get_documents.asp?session=32&docid=14839)