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## High referral rate for VPSO-assisted sex assault cases

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This article reports findings from a recent study examining the impact of Alaska's Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) program on the criminal justice response to sexual abuse of a minor (SAM) and sexual assault (SA) cases closed by the Alaska State Troopers (AST)

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between January 1, 2008 and December 31, 2011 in western Alaska. This work follows a previous study conducted by the UAA Justice Center that found that "paraprofessional police" involvement in SA/SAM cases significantly increased the likelihood of acceptance for prosecution (Wood, et al., 2011). That research did not, however, focus on the effect of VPSO involvement specifically.

This study examines the impact of VPSO involvement in SA/SAM investigations at two decision points in the progress of a case toward prosecution:

- Percent of cases with VPSO involvement that are referred by Troopers for prosecution.
- Percent of cases with VPSO involvement that, once referred, are accepted for prosecution by prosecutors.

The findings reported are based on a random sample of 683 SA/SAM incidents that occurred in communities throughout western Alaska outside the North Slope Borough. The sample represents slightly more than half (56.5%) of all SA/SAM cases closed by AST during the study period and was relatively evenly split between SA and SAM cases.

### ► State-funded paraprofessional police

The VPSO program, the sole paraprofessional police model funded by the state, is



Village Public Safety Officers (VPSOs). Courtesy Alaska State Troopers.

one of three distinct forms of paraprofessional police used to bolster the public safety and law enforcement services provided to Alaska's rural communities. VPSOs, along with Tribal Police Officers (TPOs) and Village Police Officers (VPOs) — which are not state funded, help address the logistical and

**VPSOs, funded through state grants, work for regional nonprofit Native corporations or boroughs.**

cultural challenges of policing rural Alaskan villages. Many already live in Alaska's rural communities, are immersed in local cultures, and possess a deep understanding of each community's people and public safety needs. (For a comparison of paraprofessional police and certified police see Table 1 on p. 2.)

The VPSO program, in operation since 1981, differs from certified police officers in three important ways. VPSOs are certified and regulated by the Alaska Department of

Public Safety (DPS) not by the Alaska Police Standards Council (APSC), which is the body responsible for certifying and regulating the state's police officers (APSC, 2017).

Second, VPSOs — though funded through state grants — are not employed by the State of Alaska, police departments, or villages. They work for, and are supervised by, regional non-profit Native corporations or boroughs. (Alaska State Troopers, 2018). Third, while APSC police officer certification requires a minimum of 650 continuous hours of instruction focused on law enforcement, VPSO training requires a minimum of 240 hours with a broad public safety emphasis that includes first responder basic first aid, CPR and emergency trauma training, rural fire protection, and search and rescue.

VPSOs serve as a "force-multiplier" for Troopers, who are ultimately responsible for investigation and referral of cases.

### ► VPSO first responders and more

VPSO involvement in SA/SAM cases was reported at a number of points, including as a

first responder, as an assistant in the subsequent investigation, and as support for victims and their families.

VPSOs were first responders in 7.5 percent of all SA/SAM cases during the study period. While Alaska State Troopers were first responders in more than three quarters of the cases (77.5%), paraprofessional police officers were first responders in 18.0 percent. Among the paraprofessional response, VPSOs were first responders 7.5 percent of cases, slightly less than VPOs at 8.9 percent.

This study differs from prior work by assessing not only first responding but also the role of VPSOs in the investigation of cases and post-incident support to victims and their families.

► *VPSOs involved in 1 out of 7 cases*

A series of separate indicators were used to capture whether or not VPSOs played an active role in the investigation of SA/SAM cases, independent of whether or not they were the first responders to that incident (Table 2). Case records indicated that VPSOs

evidence items, and assistance with evidence collection.

When all of these measures — first responder, interview assistance/participation, evidence collection/securing — were combined into a single measure, VPSOs were involved in the investigation of SA/SAM incidents in nearly 1 out of every 7 cases.

In addition to assisting with investigations, VPSOs helped link victims and their families to support services. In total, 13 case records indicated that VPSOs provided some form of post-incident support to victims and/or vic-

**Table 1. Alaska’s paraprofessional police v. certified police**

	Certified/regulated by	Training hours required	Employed by	Age requirement
<b>Paraprofessional police</b>				
Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO)	Alaska Department of Public Safety	240 hours	regional nonprofit corporation or borough	21 years old
Tribal Police Officer (TPO)	–	–	village tribal council or unincorporated community	19 years old
Village Police Officer (VPO)	Alaska Police Standards Council	48 hours	unincorporated village with a population of less than 1,000	19 years old
<b>Certified police officer</b>	Alaska Police Standards Council	650 hours	full-time as paid police officer of an Alaska police department	21 years old

Village Public Safety Officers (VPSOs), Tribal Police Officers (TPOs), and Village Police Officers (VPOs), provide paraprofessional police services to rural communities. Each of these paraprofessional police models, which do not have the authority or training of police

officers, have their own specific certifications and regulations. The chart above provides some basic distinctions between paraprofessional police and certified police officers in Alaska.

TPOs were first responders in 1.6 percent of the cases.

Involvement of paraprofessionals as first responders is slightly higher than prior research that used a 2003–2004 statewide SA/SAM case record sample (Postle et al., 2007).

assisted with the scheduling of interviews in 37 cases, VPSOs were present when interviews were conducted in 38 cases, VPSOs conducted interviews themselves in 20 cases, and VPSOs helped AST investigators conduct interviews in 20 cases.

tims’ families, including but not limited to medical referrals, victim advocacy referrals, and assistance with transportation.

► *VPSO cases more likely to be referred*

The primary objective of this study was to assess the extent to which VPSO involvement in the investigation of SA/SAM cases enhances the criminal justice response to reported SA/SAM incidents by increasing the likelihood that SA/SAM cases will be referred for prosecution and, given referral, increasing the likelihood that SA/SAM cases will be accepted for prosecution.

In total, 474 SA/SAM cases in the sample were referred for prosecution. Although approximately two-thirds (67.1%) of SA/SAM cases were referred when Troopers and other sworn police officers were first responders, *more than 70 percent of cases*

**When all of these measures — first responder, interview assistance/participation, evidence collection/securing — were combined into a single measure, VPSOs were involved in the investigation of SA/SAM incidents in nearly 1 out of every 7 cases.**

In that study, paraprofessional police were the first to be notified in 13.7 percent of SA/SAM cases: 6.7 percent of cases were first reported to VPSOs, 6.5 percent were first reported to VPOs, and 0.5 percent were first reported to TPOs.

VPSOs also assisted AST investigators with evidence security and collection. Case records explicitly noted that VPSOs provided such assistance in 22 of the sampled cases. Duties performed by VPSOs included securing crime scenes, securing/storing specified

in which VPSOs were first responders and nearly 85 percent of cases in which VPOs or TPOs were first responders resulted in a referral for prosecution.

► **79.7 percent of paraprofessional cases referred**

Overall, 67.1 percent of SA/SAM cases involving a sworn officer (AST investigators plus other sworn police officers) as first responder were referred for prosecution compared to 79.7 percent of cases involving a paraprofessional police officer as first responder.

► **VPSO first responder cases most likely to be accepted for prosecution**

The likelihood that SA/SAM cases would be accepted for prosecution was enhanced when VPSOs, VPOs, and TPOs were first responders. VPSOs had the highest acceptance rate (47.6%), followed closely by VPOs and TPOs (40.0%). Alaska State Trooper cases had an acceptance rate of 38.5 percent. Overall, 37.1 percent of SA/SAM cases involving a sworn officer (Troopers and other sworn officers) as first responder were accepted for prosecution compared to 42.6 percent of cases involving a paraprofessional police officer.

► **Expanded understanding of VPSO role**

This article expands our understanding of the important role that VPSOs play in providing first response support and investigative support in SA/SAM cases in rural Alaska. It shows the impact that VPSO and other paraprofessional police support have on the likelihood of cases being referred for prosecution and ultimately accepted for prosecution.

While analyses presented in this article are limited, they nevertheless provide useful information for understanding the unique role played by VPSOs in the criminal justice response to sexual violence committed in Alaska's tribal communities.

First, the analyses suggest that paraprofessional police — VPSOs, VPOs, and TPOs — enhance the criminal justice response to sexual violence by increasing the likelihood that SA/SAM cases will be referred and accepted

**Table 2. VPSO investigative activities in SA/SAM incident investigations, 2003–2011**

VPSO activity <sup>a</sup>	Number	Percent
Present during interviews (non-participant)	38	5.6%
Scheduling interviews	37	5.4
Conduct interviews alone	20	2.9
Conduct interviews with Alaska State Troopers	20	2.9
Evidence collection	19	2.8
Securing crime scene	18	2.6
Securing evidence collected	15	2.2

a. VPSO activities not mutually exclusive. Individual VPSOs could have been coded for none of the items, one of the items, or any combination of items.

for prosecution. For sexual violence survivors this means that paraprofessional police involvement in the response to these crimes improves the likelihood that perpetrators will be held accountable.

Although the focus of our study was on VPSO involvement, we did not find that VPSO involvement produced materially better criminal justice outcomes than VPO involvement or TPO involvement. The results, however, reaffirm the findings of Wood et al.'s 2011 study: it is the presence and participation of paraprofessional police in general, not a specific paraprofessional police model, that enhances the criminal justice response to SA/SAM incidents occurring in Alaska's tribal communities.

That VPSO involvement is on par or better than other paraprofessional police involvement, underscores the ability of the program to deliver positive outcomes. This is a important policy consideration since it is the only state-funded paraprofessional police program.

VPSOs, VPOs and TPOs were first responders in an estimated 18 percent, roughly one out of every 5, SA/SAM incidents reported. VPSOs, specifically, were identified as first responders in slightly less than half of that total.

This study expands our understanding of VPSO involvement in SA/SAM cases beyond the role of first responder. VPSOs actively contribute to the investigation of SA/SAM incidents by securing crime scenes, collecting and documenting evidence, conducting interviews, and providing victims and their families with important supports. How this additional VPSO involvement may enhance criminal justice outcomes is not calculated

here. Nor have we made an assessment of the participation of VPOs and TPOs beyond their role as first responders. There is much yet to be learned concerning the impact of paraprofessional police in rural communities.

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