

Budget Cuts Invite More Crime

By Senator Hollis French

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During his campaign, Gov. Murkowski promised to "get tough" on crime. Unfortunately, the Murkowski administration's actions do not back up the "get tough" rhetoric. Recently the governor wielded his veto pen to cut 15 village public safety officer positions from the budget. VPSOs are first responders to crime in Bush Alaska. Now, instead of waiting minutes for a local law enforcement officer to respond to an emergency, rural communities affected by the cuts will wait hours or even days for a state trooper to arrive by airplane.

Rural Alaska has long been plagued by high crime rates and slow police response times. One study found 57 percent of the emergency requests from Alaska Native communities in rural areas were not answered within 24 hours of the incident. Twenty-four hours is a lifetime in an emergency. Indeed, we know from the Godfrey tragedy that 45 minutes is an unacceptably long time to wait for a police response to a violent crime. The study's conclusion was that residents of Alaska Native villages have the distinction of receiving the slowest police response times in the entire United States. Combine the decrease in public safety officers with the Bush's historically high rates of homicide and rape and the outcome is not difficult to predict: In the years to come there will be more crime, more victims and fewer criminals held accountable.

The Murkowski cuts to VPSOs are especially problematic as they fall on the heels of recent legislative efforts to beef up the program, efforts that candidate Murkowski pledged to support. Two years ago the Legislature, recognizing the need for more local law enforcement, expanded the VPSO responsibilities to include probation and parole monitoring duties. The idea was to allow offenders to return home and reintegrate within their communities once their prison sentences had ended, instead of having to stay near a state parole office in less familiar surroundings. Cutting these positions means that probationers and parolees from these 15 communities will not be able to reintegrate with their communities as readily. The same bill, which passed both the House and Senate with only a single "no" vote, increased VPSO salaries and added some modest retirement benefits. As the Legislature recognized, VPSOs are a cost effective frontline force for public safety.

In a speech covering public safety issues, made Aug. 7, 2002 at the Eagle River Chamber of Commerce, candidate Murkowski delivered this pledge: "We need to evaluate and improve our delivery of police protection and justice to our Bush communities. There should be no compromise when it comes to public safety in those communities." Gov. Murkowski didn't just compromise, he surrendered outright in the 15 villages that no longer have VPSO as a result of his cuts.

My own background tells me that reducing the number of VPSOs is an ill-considered idea. I was a state prosecutor from 1996 to 2002. I was in and out of court on a daily basis. Though I spent most of my career in Anchorage, I also helped out in Bethel, Dillingham and St. Paul. Those communities have had their own share of difficulties in attracting and retaining qualified police officers. The best officers were the ones that took the time to understand something about the people and the place they served. The VPSO program was founded on that simple idea: Use local knowledge and familiarity to your advantage in fighting crime.

The Murkowski pledge to get tough on crime sounded like music to my ears during the campaign. But the music stopped when the budget ax fell. Common sense says that you can't cut the number of law enforcement officers and get tough on crime at the same time. When the legislative session begins next January, I will file legislation to restore these lost positions. Many of the legislators who voted to increase the program in 2001 are still serving. I hope their commitment to public safety is as strong now as it was then.