At least one in three Alaska villages has no local law enforcement. Sexual abuse runs rampant, public safety resources are scarce, and Gov. Mike Dunleavy wants to cut the budget.

Kiana, Alaska — Village Police Officer Annie Reed heard her VHF radio crackle to life in the spring of 2018 with the familiar voice of an elder. I need help at my house, the woman said.

Reed, who doesn’t wear a uniform because everyone in this Arctic Circle village of 421 can spot her ambling gait and bell of salt-and-pepper hair at a distance, steered her four-wheeler across town. There had been a home invasion, she learned. One of the local sex offenders, who outnumber Reed 7-to-1, had pried open a window and crawled inside, she said. The man then tore the clothes from the elder’s daughter, who had been sleeping, gripped her throat and raped her, according to the charges filed against him in state court.

Reed, a 49-year-old grandmother, was the only cop in the village. She carried no gun and, after five years on the job, had received a total of three weeks of law enforcement training. She had no backup. Even when the fitful weather allows,
the Alaska State Troopers, the statewide police force that travels to villages to make felony arrests, are a half-hour flight away.

It’s moments like these when Reed thinks about quitting. If she does, Kiana could become the latest Alaska village asked to survive with no local police protection of any kind.

An investigation by the Anchorage Daily News and ProPublica has found one in three communities in Alaska has no local law enforcement. No state troopers to stop an active shooter, no village police officers to break up family fights, not even untrained city or tribal cops to patrol the streets. Almost all of the communities are primarily Alaska Native.

Seventy of these unprotected villages are large enough to have both a school and a post office. Many are in regions with some of the highest rates of poverty, sexual assault and suicide in the United States. Most can be reached only by plane, boat, all-terrain vehicle or snowmobile. That means, unlike most anywhere else in the United States, emergency help is hours or even days away.

When a village police officer helps in a sex crime investigation by documenting evidence, securing the crime scene and conducting interviews, the case is more likely to be prosecuted, the University of Alaska Anchorage Justice Center concluded in 2018. Yet communities with no first responders of any kind can be found along the salmon-filled rivers of Western Alaska, the pancake tundra of the northwest Arctic and the icy rainforests in the southeast panhandle.

The state recognizes that most villages can’t afford their own police force and has a special class of law enforcement, called village public safety officers, to help. But it’s not working. In the 60 years since Alaska became a state, some Alaska Native leaders say, a string of governors and Legislatures have failed to protect indigenous communities by creating an unconstitutional, two-tiered criminal justice system that leaves villagers unprotected compared with their mostly white counterparts in the cities and suburbs.

ProPublica and the Daily News asked more than 560 traditional councils, tribal corporations and city governments representing 233 communities if they employ peace officers of any sort. It is the most comprehensive investigation of its kind in Alaska.

Here is what we learned:

- Tribal and city leaders in several villages said they lack jail space and police stations. At least five villages reported housing shortages that prevent them from providing potential police hires with a place to live, a practical necessity in some regions for obtaining state-funded VPSOs. In other villages, burnout and low pay, with some village police earning as little as $10 an hour, lead to constant turnover among law enforcement.

- In villages that do have police, more than 20 have hired officers with criminal records that violate state standards for village police officers over the past two years. They say that’s better than no police at all. Our review identified at least two registered sex offenders working this year as Alaska policemen.

- Alaska communities that have no cops and cannot be reached by road have nearly four times as many sex offenders, per capita, than the national average.

The lack of local police and public safety infrastructure routinely leaves residents to fend for themselves. The mayor of the Yukon River village of Russian Mission said that within the past couple years, residents duct-taped a man who had been firing a gun within the village and waited for troopers to arrive. In nearby Marshall, villagers locked their doors last year until a man who was threatening to shoot people had fallen asleep, then grabbed him and tied him up. In Kivalina, a February burglary closed the post office for a week because the village had no police officer to investigate. Elsewhere, tribes mete out banishment for serious crimes from meth dealing to arson.

“There’s no one you can call and go, ‘Oh hey, my neighbor is going crazy right now,’” said Kristen George, tribal administrator for the Bristol Bay town of Clark’s Point, which balloons from 55 people to several hundred during the commercial fishing season.
If someone started shooting, George said, “they could probably wipe us out before troopers came.”

Many of the unprotected villages are in western Alaska, where sex crime rates are double the statewide average. (Alaska’s statewide rate, in turn, is nearly three times the U.S. average.) Rape survivors, as in the Kiana home invasion case, are told not to shower and must fly to hub cities or even hundreds of miles to Anchorage to undergo a sexual assault examination.

The problem is getting worse. Our investigation found the number of police provided through the state Village Public Safety Officer Program is at or near an all-time low; the few who remain are often unhappy and overextended.

When the lone VPSO in the northwest Arctic village of Ambler investigated a domestic violence call in April, for example, he said he was attacked by two people in the home who each grabbed one of his arms. In a subsequent report, he described it as one of the scariest moments of his life as he struggled to break free and grab a can of pepper spray.

“I was unable to get any assistance as I am the only law enforcement officer in this village within about a 100 square mile radius,” he wrote.

Rather than raise pay or boost recruitment, Gov. Mike Dunleavy this year proposed a state budget that would cut $3 million in funding for vacant village-based police officer jobs. The reductions are a small part of a proposed $1.8 billion reduction in state spending as cash-strapped Alaska struggles to live within its means while avoiding an income tax and continuing to pay annual Permanent Fund dividend checks to all eligible residents.

Dunleavy, a Republican, campaigned on promoting public safety, but he also promised Alaskans that they wouldn’t have to give up the annual oil wealth checks, and that those checks might increase. Under his proposed budget, each Alaskan would receive a more than $4,000 payment in October, the largest ever. (State lawmakers are working on a competing spending plan with fewer cuts, which would maintain VPSO funding at current levels and provide potentially smaller dividends.) Dunleavy has said growth in state spending is the problem, not annual checks to residents.
Whether each Alaskan also receives basic public safety protection — the ability to dial 911 and have a police officer or trooper show up at the door — depends largely on whether they live in cities like Anchorage and Fairbanks, or off the road system.

Martha Whitman-Kassock, who oversees self-governance programs for the Bethel-based Association of Village Council Presidents, grew up in rural Alaska and said the state appears to have no strategy for adding cops in villages.

“Public safety infrastructure and service in our region is a crisis,” she said.

Lost in the talk of how best to spend Alaska’s dwindling revenue is an unanswered question: Did the state ever meet its public safety obligations to villagers?

Alaska’s state government settled a 1997 lawsuit demanding equitable funding for village schools after a judge called the state spending system “arbitrary, inadequate and racially discriminatory.” Alaska Native rights advocates contend that funding of public safety remains unfair.
In 1999, the Native American Rights Fund sued the state on behalf of 10 Alaska Native villages, including Kiana and Clark’s Point, calling the absence of police in remote communities racist and unconstitutional. The villages claimed that the state had violated Alaska Natives’ equal protection under the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution by both opposing tribal courts’ authority to oversee criminal justice through traditional means while at the same time failing to provide armed police.

The Alaska Supreme Court upheld rulings against the villages in 2005, saying the lack of certified village cops could be explained by “financial and geographical constraints” rather than racial bias or purposeful neglect.

Early Alaska legislatures and state police saw the crisis coming.

In 1979, the state created the Village Public Safety Officer Program to place lifesaving peacekeepers in remote communities. The commander of the Alaska State Troopers at the time, Col. Tom Anderson, said the program was intended to “address some of the most serious, life-threatening problems of rural villages,” where accidental death rates are highest, by training officers to be firefighters and emergency medics as well as cops.

The number of these VPSOs, unarmed peace officers paid for with state funds but employed by regional nonprofits and boroughs, has plummeted from more than 100 in 2012 to 42 today. In some cases, promising VPSO recruits accept higher-paying offers in urban police departments or private security, leaving villages without their local officer.

Troopers’ ranks, too, have dwindled. Citing “critically low staffing levels,” the Alaska Department of Public Safety closed eight trooper posts between 2015 and 2018. Five years ago, the state employed 333 troopers statewide. At the end of last year, that number had shrunk to 293.

Katelynn Reed, 22, with her son Abram Reed-Jordan, then 7 months, in her family’s home. Behind is her father, Jack Reed. Katelynn’s mother, Annie Reed, is often the town’s only cop. Loren Holmes, Anchorage Daily News
Law Enforcement on the Cheap

Outside Kiana City Hall, ravens pinwheeled above the trees on a weekday afternoon in March. A breeze carried snowmobile exhaust and wood smoke above newly built homes on stilts in the upper village down to old-town log cabins.

Inside the city building, council members in Carhartts and snow pants held their monthly meeting. For 90 minutes they shared powdered doughnuts and talked about utility rates, until it was time for Annie Reed to give a public safety report.

There had been several assaults over the past two weeks, said Reed, the village police officer who investigated the home invasion rape. “I was sick, so I didn’t do so much rounds. About 300 calls.”

When a village has no VPSO and no trooper, the only remaining option is an officer like Reed, hired by the local city government or tribe. Called village police officers or tribal police officers, they receive no benefits and are the lowest-paid and least-trained form of law enforcement in Alaska.

Reed makes about $20 an hour in a village where groceries cost twice Anchorage prices. These kinds of officers often find themselves performing tasks intended for armed, fully trained police. Reed thought she was going to be enforcing city ordinances like curfew and stopping underage drivers, not refereeing armed fights.

When people in Kiana need help they don’t dial 911, which would ring through to the Kotzebue Police Department nearly 60 miles away. They call Reed’s cellphone directly. The problems range from barking dogs to suicides to domestic brawls. She is never off duty.

“I have to drop my cooking and go. Or if my [grandkids] are getting ready to go to bed, I’m not there to say good night to them,” Reed said.

Suicides are worst. Calls involving domestic violence are common.

In Kiana, a series of trails and unpaved roads connect the neighborhoods, spilling onto the frozen rivers below. On one corner, a man with a mop of wild hair sat in his living room talking about the time he called Reed for help when his adult son began kicking him in the ribs. The man’s wife, left eye bruised, sat crying, saying she wished the local liquor store would close for the sake of Kiana’s children. The parents snapped at each other. As they argued, their daughter became angry. Why was everyone sharing family business, she asked?

The father leaped to his feet and pushed her across the living room. The young woman silently caught herself and slumped on the couch, her eyes returning to the TV.

“I don’t do meth,” her father said, although no one had asked.
A current VPSO, who asked not to be named and is not based in Kiana, said opening the door on one of these family fights is the most frightening task facing any solo Alaska peace officer.

“The No. 1 most dangerous call you could ever go to is a domestic violence call. Hands down,” the VPSO said. “So we are doing the most dangerous call that there is on a consistent basis, by ourselves with no backup [and] no communication with dispatch other than a cellphone and no way to defend yourself.”

While state law allows for communities to arm VPSOs and even city-hired village police officers like Reed, the director of the Alaska Police Standards Council said he is not aware of any employers that do so, partly because it could make insurance liability rates skyrocket for small communities.

In Savoonga, a Bering Sea island community closer to Russia than to mainland Alaska, the police chief, Michael Wongittilin, said that the first time he put on his uniform, a man aimed a shotgun at him. “About 92% of this community have high-powered rifles,” he said. “We don’t even have [bulletproof] vests. We don’t even have Tasers.”

Reed said she’s never been shot at and tries to talk her way out of any scary encounters. She began working as a cop about five years ago when a family member said the job would suit her. “She said I was a strong and outgoing person.”

Reed’s home is a warm cocoon in the upper village, where an ebony finger of baleen, the broom-length filtration system from the mouth of a bowhead whale, hangs on the wall above a tornado of small children and small dogs. The whale hunt souvenir is one of the only signs that Kiana, an upriver village, is Reed’s adopted hometown. She is originally from Utqiagvik, the northernmost city in the United States, where whaling is a seasonal rite.

Family ties between police, crime victims and offenders are impossible to avoid in villages of a few hundred people. Many officers said those inherent conflicts make the job less appealing to potential applicants.
A quick walk from Reed’s house, Franswa Henry, 40, stepped into the blowing snow with his hands in his pockets. His breath steamed in the cold, his teeth clenched. Two bounding white puppies circled his feet.

Henry said he’s on probation and recently got out of jail in Nome, where someone broke his jaw. He was there serving time on an assault charge that Reed had investigated.

“I had a shotgun pulled on me. You know, I grabbed an ax,” Henry said. It was a messy family dispute between stepbrothers in January, with kids inside the home. Hours before a state trooper was able to get to the village, Reed arrived and took statements. Kotzebue prosecutors filed charges and Henry turned himself in a few days later, pleading guilty to fourth-degree assault. But he said Reed can’t possibly be impartial — the kids in the house were her grandchildren.

She said arresting neighbors is never easy.

“I still have a few friends out there and a few families that still talk to me,” she said. “It’s pretty hard when you have to arrest somebody and they’ll start hating you for a while.”

Henry noted that Reed, like many village police officers, has a rap sheet of her own. She pleaded guilty to a harassment charge in 2016 and to misdemeanor assault in 2012. Both cases involved fights with family members, a record that would prevent her from working as a police officer in Anchorage or other large departments. (Reed described the cases as minor events that do not interfere with her work. She otherwise declined to comment on them. “It’s the past,” she said.)

Under state law, village police officers are not supposed to have felony records but misdemeanors can be considered on a case-by-case basis. Alaska Police Standards Council Executive Director Bob Griffiths said domestic violence convictions of any kind usually disqualify someone from receiving state approval to be a village officer.

But village police officers with criminal records are routinely hired without a background check because village leaders do not inform the state of new hires, and the regulation requiring them to do so has no teeth, Griffiths said.

“There’s Not Anybody There Looking”

Not everyone wants more big-city style, badge-and-gun policing in Alaska villages. Often, city and tribal leaders seek a mix of traditional peacekeeping and modern law enforcement.

The lakeside fishing community of Igiugig has requested a VPSO for years, said AlexAnna Salmon, village council president, but it has not received one. “The tribe just takes matters into our own hands when there are issues.”

“Severe troublemakers are banished. We usually purchase them a ticket out of Igiugig and then ask airlines to put them on a no-fly list,” she said of the Alaska Peninsula community.

About 140 miles to the east, in the Alutiiq village of Nanwalek, the chief of the traditional council has kicked a meth dealer out of town for good, a form of banishment known in Alaska as a “blue ticket.” “Basically the council has been able to handle a lot on their own without support from law enforcement,” tribal administrator Gwen Kvasnikoff said.

In the meantime, Alaska’s congressional delegation has attempted to hand more federal money, and more authority, to tribal courts. A pilot program proposed by Rep. Don Young, a Republican, would give special criminal jurisdiction to five Alaska tribal governments under the Violence Against Women Act.

Sen. Lisa Murkowski, a Republican who has pursued federal funding for village tribal courts, recently called on U.S. Attorney General William Barr to visit Alaska villages to see the public safety problems firsthand.

But there’s a big difference between the court system and on-the-ground police, Murkowski said when informed
by the Anchorage Daily News of how many Alaska communities have no police whatsoever.

“If we don’t have the law enforcement in the first place, it’s really hard,” Murkowski said. “People know that there’s not anybody there looking. It makes it easier to be the perpetrator.”

Research suggests that factors such as self determination, the presence of prominent traditional elders and employment opportunities — rather than more police — are the key to reducing suicide, alcohol abuse and other problems that have troubled many Alaska villages. But dozens of village and tribal leaders told the Anchorage Daily News and ProPublica they want and need police protection.

“When I’m here by myself and somebody comes pounding on my door and wants to beat the living daylights out of me, it would have been nice to have a VPSO in that next office,” said Mary Willis, tribal president for the Kuskokwim River village of Stony River.

In Wales, where a judge recently ordered the school district to pay $12.6 million after an employee sexually abused multiple girls, City Clerk Gerald Oxereok said the village hasn’t had any law enforcement for 20 years. On the shores of the Bering Strait, the whaling town is the westernmost city in mainland North America.
“Nobody has been applying for it,” Oxereok said of the vacant VPSO job. Some locals who might want the work don’t meet minimum requirements such as a high school diploma. Or they smoke pot or have a felony record, both of which are disqualifying.

When a screaming man broke the door to the tribal office in Kokhanok, a village on the shores of Iliamna Lake with 168 people and no police, tribe employee Lysa Lacson said she was forced to evacuate the building.

Troopers arrived three days later.

That was in December, Lacson said. The tribe told local airlines that the man was forbidden from flying back to Kokhanok. But that doesn’t always work. Sometimes the banished fly in to a different village and boat home, she said.

“We’re not trained in responding to those things,” Lacson said.

On the same day that Annie Reed investigated the home invasion rape case, a man attacked three people with a butcher knife in the Yup’ik fishing village of Kotlik some 280 miles to the south. Troopers say the suspect appeared at a schoolhouse vowing to kill the principal, who in turn warned villagers of the attack over VHF radios. The custodian locked the school doors and teachers herded students into the gymnasium and lunchroom, where adults stood guard at entrances.

Kotlik tribal administrator Pauline Okitkun said the town sometimes has village police officers, depending on funding. There was a young woman employed as one at the time, she said, but the call was too dangerous for her to handle unarmed and alone.

The man stabbed three people, including one who struck his arm with a piece of rebar to try and knock free the 8-inch...
knife, according to charges filed against him. The suspect also stabbed his sister in the stomach, but she was able to snatch the weapon away, according to the charges. Villagers held him in a cell until troopers arrived by plane more than two hours after the attack and school lockdown began. A Bethel judge ordered a competency evaluation for the suspect, who is awaiting trial and, according to the court clerk, has not entered a plea.

Kotlik, near the mouth of the Yukon River, is in Western Alaska, an area with the highest rate of reported sex crimes in the state. Leaders from 56 tribes in the region have listed public safety as their top concern in each of the past two years, according to the regional nonprofit, the Association of Village Council Presidents.

The council visited 45 communities in Western Alaska in 2018 to photograph dilapidated public safety buildings and count police officers. The resulting report found that eight villages had no jail cells of any kind. In others, if there were local police, the officers worked in headquarters with boarded doors, broken windows or no indoor plumbing. In one of those buildings, two inmates burned to death on April 28 while locked in their cells. The council researchers had flagged problems with the window, door lock and stairs months earlier.

“The idea that there are places in the United States, a first-world country, that do not have public safety ... a basic human right, was horrifying to me,” said Azara Mohammadi, a council employee who worked on the survey.

In one of the larger surveyed communities, Mountain Village, population 804, the nonprofit found only one village police officer remains after another officer had been charged with stealing from the scene of a homicide. The Yukon River village’s public safety problems continued on a Friday afternoon in March, when the Mountain Village officer arrested a man accused of raping two people and took him to a jail cell housed within the steepled city office.

When an Alaska state trooper arrived the next afternoon, he discovered the jail empty and no guard on duty. The 19-year-old suspect had escaped overnight. By the time the trooper found and arrested him, he’d been missing for 16 hours. He has pleaded not guilty on charges of sexual assault, giving alcohol to a minor and felony escape.
Two Classes of Alaskans

Oil taxes, and savings accounts that were built upon oil taxes, pay the bills in Alaska. But even in times of plenty, when 2 million barrels were flowing through the trans-Alaska oil pipeline every day or when North Slope crude prices skyrocketed, the state has struggled to provide core services to villages.

Today, thousands of rural homes in 29 villages still lack running water and flush toilets, according to the state Village Safe Water Program. The road system reaches only about one out of every five communities.

Unapologetic in directing billions in federal spending to Alaska, the late Sen. Ted Stevens argued the young state's isolation and the unique needs of Alaska villages demanded heavy government investment. At the height of his funding powers as chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee, Stevens backfilled the VPSO program with $1.5 million in federal funding when the state cut spending on those officers in 2003.

Nadia Sussman, ProPublica
Dunleavy, who was elected governor last year and subsequently declared a “war on criminals,” has proposed a spending plan that includes defunding vacant village police officer jobs while funding trooper recruitment. But troopers don’t just serve villages, they respond to crimes in highly populated areas on the road system — including much of the fast-growing Matanuska-Susitna Borough that Dunleavy and former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin call home.

Dunleavy said the cuts to the VPSO program reflect the decreasing number of village officers. (Saying the program is now “plagued with high turnover and poor retention,” the Alaska Legislature this month announced the creation of a working group that will attempt to rebuild it.)

“The drop in VPSOs employed occurred despite pay increases, retention bonuses and approved funding for equipment and office improvements,” Dunleavy spokesman Matt Shuckerow said. “As a result, Gov. Dunleavy’s budget proposal aligns funding and historic expenditures within the VPSO program.”

Shuckerow said that starting pay for VPSOs has increased from $16.55 an hour in 2008 to $26.79 today. That amounts to about $56,000 a year, wages that VPSOs say is still woefully low given they receive nearly identical training to Kotzebue-based troopers who make three times as much.

Sen. Lyman Hoffman, D-Bethel, warned that the spending plan creates two classes of Alaskans when it comes to public safety protection.

“If you were living in that community for a year and we had someone going out and shooting up the place and you did not have an officer to go to talk to, I think you would feel as unsafe as they do,” Hoffman told the state budget director in January.

As rural Alaskans learned of the proposed cuts, Kiana city manager Ely Cyrus received an email from the head of the VPSO program in his region.

“Ely, just an FYI at this point in time we will not be hiring a new VPSO for Kiana,” it read, referring to the state-funded police officer job that offers higher pay and requires more training than Annie Reed’s role as a city cop. “The state is withdrawing funding for three positions in order to help provide the money to give the Alaska state troopers a 7.5 percent raise.”

Cyrus, who sometimes moonlights as a snowplow operator, gave a tour of the village public safety building with its two jail cells and a stack of paperbacks for the guards. Next door sat a mud-flecked home, housing for the VPSO, for the sporadic times there is one. Plywood covered the shattered living room windows.

“I’m Overwhelmed”

When a home invasion rape occurs in Alaska’s largest city, the Anchorage Police Department sends patrol cars with sirens blaring, Deputy Chief Ken McCoy said. One uniformed officer makes sure the victim is safe while others search for the suspect. Paramedics appear. A detective from one of two special sex crime units joins a victim’s advocate and a nurse to begin the investigation and rape kit exam. Back at the crime scene, an officer stands guard to preserve evidence.

Two plane rides and several hours away, above the Arctic Circle, all the village of Kiana had on the night of the home invasion rape was Annie Reed.

When she arrived at the scene, she said, it was too late to find an overnight safe house for the victim. The suspect, 42-year-old Edmond Morris, had a history of rape, pleading guilty to sexual assault in 2016. While in Kotzebue in 2017, he broke into the home of a legally blind woman who lives alone, according to charges filed against him. The woman hid in the bathroom to call police. Morris had spent the past 15 years in and out of jail before returning to Kiana.
“Holy crap,” Trooper Anne Sears said she thought. Sears looked up Morris’ criminal record after learning of the alleged attack from Reed and investigated the case. “Everything he’s done. He’s done it before. Even his other cases were leading up to something similar.”

Reed said that when she asked the man to leave, he lingered around the home. With nowhere else to go and the midnight sun about to set, Reed took the woman to spend the night in her own home. (“Annie is freaking awesome,” said Sears, a longtime state trooper. “Kiana is lucky to have her.”)

One of Reed’s daughters fixed the woman a cot to sleep on in the living room, beneath the baleen and dreamcatchers. Another daughter traveled with the victim the next day to Kotzebue, but because there was no nurse available that day to begin a sexual assault exam, the victim flew another 550 miles to speak with city detectives in Anchorage. Her neck and wrists bruised, the young woman carried the gym shorts and ripped tank top she was wearing during the attack as evidence in a plastic bag.

It took three weeks for troopers to complete an investigation and arrive in Kiana to arrest Morris. During that time, he
returned to the home where the attack occurred several times to ask if the family planned to press charges, prosecutors allege. He faces charges of sexual assault, assault and criminal trespassing.

In a phone interview from the Nome jail, Morris said he did not attack the victim and said she let him in the window. When the victim’s mother told him to get out of the house, he did, he said.

Morris is awaiting trial with a hearing scheduled for July. The window that Morris is accused of breaking open in order to commit the sexual assault is now covered with plywood, adorned with smiling hunting photos torn from a calendar. Dents still tattoo the front door, but that happened later.

The young woman, after returning to Kiana, took an ax to the doorknob. She’d been drinking and tried to break down the door after an argument with her mom. When that didn’t work, she climbed through the same window that, according to troopers, her rapist had pried open. She was later found sitting in the living room, sobbing.

Her mother doesn’t know exactly where she is now. Probably Anchorage. They talk on the phone sometimes, but never about that night, the mother said. “She just keep it inside her.”

Reed, in the meantime, has a decision to make. A troopers sergeant in Kotzebue said she is among the most reliable of the village police officers in the region. But after fielding hundreds of calls in a recent month, and deaths in the family, she has started looking for a job with days off. Or at least benefits.

“I’m tired,” she said.

A long sigh.
“I’m overwhelmed.”

As the anniversary of the home invasion rape approached, something unexpected happened. The VPSO who said he was attacked during a domestic violence call in the village of Ambler, 70 miles upriver, was reassigned by the borough. On April 30, he showed up in Kiana, the city manager said. Backup for Annie Reed.

But the move had a downside: It made Ambler, population 287, the 70th village in Alaska to have no police of any kind at some point this year.

*ProPublica research reporter Alex Mierjeski and Anchorage Daily News reporter Tegan Hanlon contributed to this report.*

*Design and production by Setareh Baig and David Sleight.*
The Village Where Every Cop Has Been Convicted of Domestic Violence

Dozens of convicted criminals have been hired as cops in Alaska communities. Often, they are the only applicants. In Stebbins, every cop has a criminal record, including the chief.

By Kyle Hopkins, Anchorage Daily News
July 18, 11:30 a.m. EDT

STEBBINS, Alaska — When Nimeron Mike applied to be a city police officer here last New Year’s Eve, he didn’t really expect to get the job.

Mike was a registered sex offender and had served six years behind bars in Alaska jails and prisons. He’d been convicted of assault, domestic violence, vehicle theft, groping a woman, hindering prosecution, reckless driving, drunken driving and choking a woman unconscious in an attempted sexual assault. Among other crimes.

“My record, I thought I had no chance of being a cop,” Mike, 43, said on a recent weekday evening, standing at his doorway in this Bering Strait village of 646 people.

He was wrong.

On the same day Mike filled out the application, the city of Stebbins hired him, handing him a policeman’s cellphone to answer calls for help.
“Am I a cop now?” he remembers thinking. “It’s like, that easy?”

The short answer is yes. With low pay and few people wanting the jobs, it is that easy in some small Alaska communities for a convicted felon, even someone who has admitted to a sex crime or who was recently released from prison, to be hired with public money to work as a city police officer.

It’s also a violation of state public safety regulations, yet it happens all the time.

In Stebbins alone, all seven of the police officers working as of July 1 have pleaded guilty to domestic violence charges within the past decade. Only one has received formal law enforcement training of any kind.

The current police chief pleaded guilty to throwing a teenage relative to the ground and threatening to kill her after drinking homebrew liquor in 2017. (Alcohol is illegal in the village.) He was hired a year later. He declined to answer questions in person and blocked a reporter on Facebook.

Two men who until recently were Stebbins police officers pleaded guilty to spitting in the faces of police officers; one was the subject of a 2017 sexual assault restraining order in which a mother said he exposed himself to her 12-year-old daughter. (The officer named in the restraining order said he was busy and hung up the phone when asked about his criminal history; the other officer admitted to the crime.)

The seven-man police force has served a combined six years in jails, prisons and halfway houses on dozens of criminal charges. That doesn’t include Mike, who was terminated on March 29, city records show. He says he wasn’t given a reason, but the city administrator said it was because he wasn’t responding to calls and didn’t get along with another officer.

ProPublica and the Anchorage Daily News reported in May that one in three Alaska communities has no local cops of any kind. In June, U.S. Attorney General William P. Barr declared a “law enforcement emergency” in rural Alaska, announcing $10.5 million in Justice Department spending to support village police.

*The village of Stebbins, along the Norton Sound coast. (Bill Roth/Anchorage Daily News)*
In the villages where there are cops, a different problem has emerged. A first-of-its-kind investigation by the Daily News and ProPublica has found that at least 14 cities in Alaska have employed police officers whose criminal records should have prevented them from being hired under Department of Public Safety regulations. The news organizations identified more than 34 officers who should have been ineligible for these jobs. In all but three cases, the police hires were never reported by the city governments to the state regulatory board, as required.

In eight additional communities, local tribal governments have hired tribal police officers convicted of domestic violence or sex crimes.

All 42 of these tribal and city police officers have rap sheets that would prevent them from being hired by the Anchorage Police Department and its urban peers, as Alaska state troopers or even as private security guards most anywhere else in the United States. Many remain on the job today.

“It’s outrageous that we have a situation where we have a, such a lack of public safety that communities are resorting to hiring people who have the propensity for violence,” said Melanie Bahnke, a board member for the Alaska Federation of Natives, which represents 191 tribes. “And placing them in a position where they have control over people and possibly could victimize the victims further.”

“That’s like a frontier mentality,” said Bahnke, who is also chief executive for Kawerak Inc., a Nome-based tribal consortium that oversees state-paid police in the region.

A key part of the problem: There aren’t enough state troopers or other state-funded cops to go around. When it comes to boots-on-the-ground law enforcement, village police officers (VPOs) and tribal police officers (TPOs) working in Alaska villages are at least as common. Yet no one keeps track of who these officers are, where they are working, if they’ve passed a background check or if they’ve received any training.

The state agency that regulates Alaska police has suspended efforts to solve this mess.

Alaska Police Standards Council Director Bob Griffiths said his agency barely has the time to fulfill its regular duties of juggling complaints and appeals involving certified police officers. It doesn’t have enough money to also visit rural Alaska so it can research ways to fix police hiring practices. That effort will come in the fall, at the earliest.

Yet the stakes are high. The same Alaska towns that have no police, or criminals working as cops, are in areas with some of the highest rates of domestic violence and sexual assault in the country.

When a case relies on an arrest by an untrained cop who has a criminal record, prosecutors sometimes do not want to put that person in front of a jury and instead might drop or reduce felony charges, Griffiths warned. “I could see felony domestic violence assault cases that end up being pleaded down to harassment or coercion.”

Nome District Attorney John Earthman agreed that sometimes happens, and that cases involving untrained officers sometimes lack key evidence such as recordings of initial interviews. He said public defenders have raised concerns about some police because they have defended those same officers on recent criminal charges.

“I’ve been out here almost 20 years and some of these are realities that you just don’t see in the city,” Earthman said. Still, the hiring of Mike as a village police officer came as a surprise.

“If he’s the only one who took a statement from a suspect or a defendant, that may be an issue.”

“You Are Absolutely Desperate”

The story of how Alaska communities came to quietly hire criminals as police officers, without consequence or oversight, is the story of how cash-poor local governments found themselves without law enforcement and few options.

There are several different forms of police in rural Alaska.

The best trained and best paid are state troopers. More than 300 work across Alaska, but just one-third are based off the road system.

Next is a class of cops unique to Alaska: village public safety officers (VPSOs), who are nearly as well-trained as troopers and are also paid by the state. But the number of VPSOs appears to be at an all-time low, with just 42 officers statewide this year, compared with more than 100 in 2013.

On the same day the federal government announced millions in emergency funds for Alaska rural police in June, Gov. Mike Dunleavy revealed he had vetoed millions from the VPSO program, saying the money was for vacant positions.

Dunleavy, a Republican, has declared a “war on criminals” and vowed to punish sexual predators. “If you hurt Alaskans, if you molest children, if you assault women, we’re really going to come after you,” Dunleavy said at a July 8 crime bill signing.

Village police officers leave on a four-wheeler after giving public safety reports at a City Council meeting in Stebbins on June 27. (Bill Roth/Anchorage Daily News)

Asked moments later why the Alaska Police Standards Council has suspended efforts to revamp law enforcement hiring regulations, given that men convicted of sex crimes are working as police in some villages, Dunleavy offered no specifics.

but said he planned to hold meetings over the summer with “stakeholders.”

Bahnke, the head of the Nome-based nonprofit that employs VPSOs, said that only five of the 15 communities in her region have VPSOs and called on the state to spend unused salaries on equipment, housing and other amenities that would make it easier to recruit new officers.

Alaska Native leaders once sued to force the state to provide armed, trained police in villages, but their lawsuit failed in state court. That leaves VPOs and TPOs to pick up the slack. They tend to be younger, paid less and have less training than traditional police.

VPOs, such as those in Stebbins, are mainly expected to enforce city laws such as curfews and misdemeanors. In practice, however, they must sometimes handle life-and-death encounters such as standoffs and suicide threats. TPOs perform a similar role but are employed by federally recognized tribes and are not regulated by the state.

Of the emergency village law enforcement funding announced in June by the attorney general, $4.5 million will go to hire tribal officers who will not be required to undergo background checks.

But lack of funding for cops isn’t the only problem. Many villages have no housing for police, no secure jail cells or no public safety building. When Barr visited the state in May to see the problem for himself, he called the lack of services one of the most pressing public safety needs in the United States.

Our review also found that villages have routinely ignored — or said they were unaware of — laws that require training and bar people with certain criminal records from being hired.

Last year, the Daily News reported on isolated cases of people with criminal records working as police in remote Alaska villages. That story focused on a case at the edge of the Arctic Circle, in the tundra village of Selawik, where the city employed an officer who had been convicted of bootlegging and faced a pending charge of giving alcohol to a
minor when he sexually assaulted an underage girl. The 16-year-old died the night of the attack, and the city settled a subsequent wrongful death lawsuit for $300,000. (The officer pleaded guilty to rape and furnishing alcohol to a minor in that case but was not charged in her death. He has not responded to numerous interview requests.)

What happened in Selawik is far from an isolated example, our comprehensive examination shows. Between January and May, ProPublica and the Daily News identified 50 city and tribal governments that employ officers. Some would not provide names, but of the 159 officers identified, more than 42 have been convicted of or pleaded guilty to assault or another crime, most often domestic violence, that is typically a bar to working in law enforcement.

Leaders in some communities, including Stebbins, say they have little alternative but to hire anyone they can.

“It’s easy to look at in that light, ‘How could these people hire criminals to do this job?’” said Jason Wilson, public safety manager for several Southeast Alaska villages.

“When you live in a community and you’re desperate, you are absolutely desperate for some law enforcement and to have somebody step up that might have a blemished record, you are willing to say, ‘OK, I think person is still going to do OK for us.’”

Asked if the criminal backgrounds of some TPOs and VPOs hamper investigations or undermine prosecutors’ cases, Alaska’s Public Safety Commissioner Amanda Price said the local officers are vital to fighting crime in far-flung communities.

“Our troopers regularly say that, while tomorrow they might have to arrest a VPO or a TPO, today they are critical,” Price said.
“He Was Our Only Applicant”

In village after village, troubling examples abound.

In Mountain Village, population 864, one recent VPO awaits trial on charges of stealing from a murder scene. Court records show five other recent VPOs in the same Yukon River community are awaiting hearings or have admitted to criminal charges including four counts of disorderly conduct, three counts of assault, two cases of neglect, two cases of drunken driving, two charges of harassment and three cases of domestic violence.

Along the Norton Sound coast, the city of Shaktoolik in May hired a VPO who has pleaded guilty to five assault charges within the past 10 years. “He was our only applicant so we had no other choice,” a city employee said.

Among those hired as TPOs in the fishing villages of Kasigluk and Tuntutuliak, located among the vast web of river-fed lakes in western Alaska, are registered sex offenders who admitted to abuse of a minor or attempted sexual abuse of a minor. The Kasigluk tribal administrator said he was directed by the tribal council not to talk to a reporter about the issue. In Tuntutuliak, Administrator Deanna White said the village council was willing to hire an offender on a part-time basis because of constant turnover and a lack of applicants in the high-stress job.

“All the time we hired, they wouldn't last,” she said.

The Yukon River community of Mountain Village. (Loren Holmes/Anchorage Daily News)

In the Kuskokwim Bay village of Kwigglingok, a 33-year-old man worked as a tribal police officer while subject to a long-term domestic violence restraining order. He was indicted in February on charges of sexually abusing an 11-year-old and is awaiting trial in a Bethel jail. He has pleaded not guilty.

And in the nearby Kuskokwim River village of Napakiak, recent police hires include William Gibson Smith as a TPO.

Smith was picked to patrol the village despite a complaint filed two years earlier by a young mother whose 3-year-
old daughter told her that her bottom hurt. The girl later confided that Smith had touched her there, according to an application for a sexual assault restraining order filed in Bethel court. Based on a “preponderance of the evidence,” a magistrate ordered that Smith, who was not present at the hearing, stay away from the family. (Such an order is not automatically disqualifying, but the regulations say candidates must be of “good moral character.”)

Despite the judge’s orders, a matter of public record and discoverable on a public court database, Smith was hired to perform police work in Napakiak. He had the power to place his neighbors in custody and to hold them against their will if he declared them to be drunk or disorderly. In October, the Alaska State Troopers arrested Smith on charges of having sex with a different underage girl, and he has been in custody since. Today he is awaiting trial in that case and in another, in which he was charged with sexually assaulting a woman in police custody. He has pleaded not guilty in both cases.

In Stebbins, Louise Martin said she knows all too well the toll that officers with criminal records can take on a town. She recently filed a restraining order against a current city police officer, accusing the man of threatening her in person and through Facebook messages in which he said he would beat her up. Prior to his hire, the officer had been convicted of domestic violence and bootlegging.

“For him to be a cop, he shouldn’t be acting like this, especially if there’s kids + elders around,” Martin wrote in her application for the restraining order. An initial order was granted but a longer-term one was denied because Martin did not participate at a hearing.

Martin grew up in Stebbins and isn’t unsympathetic to the needs of the village. “They need a trooper in town.” But she said the city cops “hide behind their badge and harass people and drink on the job.”

One of the Worst Jobs in Town

Stebbins, an Inupiaq and Yup’ik village, survived a generation of monstrous sexual abuse by a Catholic priest and church volunteers. It is plagued by 12% unemployment, and its lone grocery store charges twice as much for food as it costs in Anchorage. As the lack of police data regarding missing and murdered indigenous women raises concerns nationwide, residents of Stebbins and neighboring Saint Michael say the suspicious death of a local woman, 19-year-old Chynelle “Pretty” Lockwood, in 2017 remains unsolved.

The city offers no benefits to part-time officers who walk into life-and-death emergencies. They are untrained and unarmed, their only equipment a cellphone and a pair of handcuffs. The police department, like most homes, has no flush toilets or running water.

Next to hauling waste, residents say being a cop is one of the worst jobs in town. In 2001, the mayor of Stebbins was shot in the face as part of a robbery scheme involving a 20-year-old man who had been working as a VPO despite jail sentences for assault and animal cruelty.

“I was not very fond of that [hire] in the first place,” then-Mayor Robert Ferris told the Daily News at the time, having survived the shooting. But, he reasoned, “In a place like this you take any help you can get.”

After serving time in prison for his role in the mayor’s shooting, the former VPO returned to Stebbins and was eventually hired back by the city as a police officer, current city officials said.

Little has changed in recent years.
“Other people don’t want to apply,” said the current Stebbins city administrator, Joan Nashoanak, when asked why her local government has hired so many VPOs with criminal backgrounds. “They are willing to work.”

In Alaska’s largest city, the Anchorage Police Department receives 18 applications for every cop it hires. Each recruit is subject to criminal background checks, drug tests and polygraphs.

“It’s incredibly important for our department to uphold those standards because they are key to upholding the public’s trust in law enforcement,” said APD Chief Justin Doll, who serves on the Alaska Police Standards Council board. “If the public looks at a law enforcement officer and sees a lengthy criminal background, it undermines that trust.”

Anchorage police pay starts at $33.61 an hour plus benefits, retirement and a union.

In Stebbins, Nashoanak said it’s impossible to avoid candidates with a felony or a misdemeanor within the past five years, who should be prohibited from serving as cops by law, because of constant burnout and turnover. Officers are paid $14 an hour.

Factor in small-town politics and the pressure to look the other way when an influential person or family gets in trouble, and it’s easy to see why officers are constantly quitting.

“It’s a problem, but it’s never really been addressed,” Nashoanak said. “We can’t find anybody else without a criminal background.”

A former city administrator, Doreen Tom, says she has complained to the city about the officers’ conduct and rap sheets.

“These guys are criminals,” Tom said of the VPOs. “There’s qualifications to be a police. What you can’t be and what you can be. You can’t have a misdemeanor within five years and these policemen, there’s police who were charged with rape. People who were charged with assault.”

Substitute Village Police Officer Robert Kirk, left, and Alaska rode a city four-wheeler as they enforced the curfew in Stebbins on June 27. (Bill Roth/Anchorage Daily News)
One recent Stebbins VPO is 24-year-old Harold Kitsick Jr., who has worked off and on over the past year despite a conviction for spitting in the face of a police officer in nearby Kotlik in 2013. The victim in that case said Kitsick had threatened to kill him, his 6-year-old child and his wife and vowed to burn down his house. The Kotlik officer said that he could smell gasoline around his home and that he waited out the night with a gun handy, afraid for his life.

Reached by phone, Kitsick denied that he threatened the police officer but admitted to attacking him. “I assaulted him, I hit him. I spit on him and kicked him. That was it.”

The Kotlik VPO quit being a police officer soon after the encounter with Kitsick. He asked not to be identified because his wife still works in the region. He, too, was a VPO with a criminal record, he said. The city of Kotlik recruited him despite an assault charge that should have prevented him from being hired under state law.

“There’s really no background checks to it,” he said.

Stebbins city records show Kitsick stopped working as a police officer on May 28 after two years on patrol. He sometimes tried looking for different work with better pay and more hours, he said, but jobs are scarce in the village.

“Then [the city] asked me to go back. I was, like, ‘Well, might as well,’” said Kitsick, who is currently awaiting trial on two new charges. Troopers accused him of punching a woman in the face and punching fellow Stebbins VPO John Aluska in two separate 2018 incidents. He has pleaded not guilty to both.

Aluska, who himself was convicted of domestic violence in 2010 and 2014, said he hasn’t been in trouble in years and is part of a roster of about seven officers who some Stebbins residents said work well together.

“The current ones we have are pretty good,” Stebbins health aide Tania Snowball said of the police force. While she spoke, Snowball cleaned a gleaming chum salmon, hauled moments earlier from the Bering Sea. “The ones in the past, they never answered their phones.”

Tania Snowball cuts up salmon after a day working as the village health aide. As a first responder who relies on village police officers to handle emergencies, Snowball said she couldn’t do her job without the local village police officers. (Bill Roth/Anchorage Daily News)
As a health aide, Snowball said she partners with VPOs. If there were no police — or if the city couldn't hire people with criminal records — Snowball said there would be no one to assist her in emergencies such as suicide attempts or shootings. She would quit the clinic.

“You have to have somebody help respond, because most of the people that call are intoxicated. There’s four-wheeler accidents or serious injuries,” she said. “VPOs gotta be available.”

“I’m a Pretty Good Cop”

A few hours after the health aide finished cutting fish along the foaming shoreline, Aluska began the midnight to 4 a.m. patrol. Rain beaded on his four-wheeler, a Honda shared by the entire police force.

Aluska circled the village in a wide loop. There are no stop lights and no paved roads in Stebbins. Most homes rest on stilts; red foxes and berry bushes hide in the knee-high grass. All groceries and vehicles arrive by plane or barge, and trailer-sized shipping containers in primary colors dot the yards. Aluska has lived here all his life.

“Go home!” he hollered to a crowd of middle-school-age kids outside the gymnasium. More than 40% of the village population is younger than 19, and parents said it's hard to keep them indoors this time of year, when the sun dips low and red but never really sets.

“Don't make me tell you again,” Aluska warned. A boy in a hoodie shuffled his feet, walking with exaggerated slowness.

The Honda engine clicked and popped as he turned off the ignition. The real trouble usually starts later. Everyone knows when the VPOs go off duty.

Aluska provides a tour of the public safety building. Aluska has a criminal record but said it does not interfere with his police work. (Bill Roth/Anchorage Daily News)
If someone is driving drunk, getting in fights or becomes a danger to themselves, they are held in one of three cells in the city jail. The building used to be a library, but it was converted when someone broke the fuel line at the old jail house, soaking the building in heating oil.

Aluska likes the new jailhouse. No one has broken out yet.

“In my time it was easier,” Aluska said.

The 42-year-old said he got into his share of trouble when he was younger. Making homebrew. Escaping custody. “It’s been years ago now since I last went to jail.”

Asked if he had ever been convicted of domestic violence, Aluska said he had, in 1998, but the charge was dropped. State court records show he also pleaded guilty to domestic violence-related assault charges in 2010 and 2014.

Aluska doesn’t think his record makes him any less able to keep the village safe. Same for his colleagues.

“Not really,” he said. “I get a call and, if you’re drunk and doing bad things, I’ll come get you.”

The next afternoon the rain disappeared, replaced by a damp heat that sent kids splashing between gillnets.

At city hall, the Stebbins City Council gathered for a monthly meeting. Chairs ringed a cafeteria table beneath property maps of village landmarks: The Old Church. The Elder Center. The New School. Skin drums and a bingo scoreboard (proceeds help pay police salaries) adorned the adjacent community hall.

One by one, the police officers gave monthly reports and brainstormed public safety ideas. Officer Delbert Acoman suggested police begin wearing small body cameras purchased from Amazon; the police chief admitted he can’t bring
himself to shoot dogs when an animal needs to be put down. One officer who is the subject of a current restraining order wondered about turning a vacant building into a teen center.

At 45, Acoman said he’s worked as a Stebbins police officer off and on for two decades. During that time, court records show, he has been convicted of a dozen crimes, including three counts of domestic violence. His last no-contest plea to assault came five years ago and Acoman said he’s turned a corner — trying to provide for his wife and kids. A steady job makes that possible.

Acoman headed home as his colleagues prepared for overnight patrols. Middle schoolers chased rebounds on an outdoor basketball court as two young men sat wrenching on a four-wheeler, fanning mosquitoes.

At the edge of town lives Nimeron Mike, the registered sex offender. While he was working as a police officer he could never shake the feeling that visiting state troopers might take him away to jail, instead of the people he arrested.

Mike said he is ready to go back on patrol any time the city needs him. He figures street smarts must count for something.

“I’ve done my time, now all I want to do is work and make money,” he said. “I’m a pretty good cop.”

For now, the state of Alaska hasn’t caught up with Mike’s change in job status. The official state sex offender registry database still lists his employer as “City of Stebbins.”

_ProPublica research reporting fellow Alex Mierjeski and Anchorage Daily News reporters Alex DeMarban, Tegan Hanlon, Michelle Theriault Boots, Annie Zak and Jeff Parrott contributed to this report._

She Leapt From a Moving Car to Escape Her Rapist. Then, She Waited 18 Years for an Arrest.

Anna Sattler’s rape kit sat untested since 2001 as Alaska’s backlog got worse. Now, an ex-Iditarod musher faces charges, and she’s speaking publicly about the attack for the first time.

By Kyle Hopkins, Anchorage Daily News
Sept. 6, 12:45 p.m. EDT

This article was produced in partnership with the Anchorage Daily News, a member of the ProPublica Local Reporting Network.

She met him at a bar on a windless January night. Anna Sattler, 30 years old at the time, was wrapping up a girls’ night out when she got into an argument with friends and found herself without a designated driver. When this kindly stranger appeared, offering to drive her home, she accepted.

“The intention was never to pick anybody up. I was looking for a ride,” said Sattler, who had grown up in the close-knit native Yup’ik communities of Western Alaska and was still learning to navigate life on the urban road system. The man seemed so nice, she remembers. Until she started saying no.

https://www.propublica.org/article/she-leapt-from-a-moving-car-to-escape-her-rapist-then-she-waited-18-years-for-an-arrest
Sattler says the man parked along a dark stretch of highway on the Kenai Peninsula, a mountainous region dotted with a few small cities south of Anchorage. There, he raped her, dragging her back to his van again and again when she tried to escape and scrambled for the woods. Afterward, as he began driving again, he asked her if anyone knew where she was. Would anyone miss her?

Sattler opened the door and tumbled from the moving vehicle. “If I was going to die that night, I was going to die by my own hands,” she said.

That was 18 years ago.

Like countless other reports of sexual assault in Alaska, the case soon went cold. Sattler told a state trooper what had happened and a nurse swabbed her body for DNA samples. In the months and years after the attack, she said, no one seemed to believe her.

“I’m someone’s auntie. I’m someone’s mom. I’m someone’s sister,” she said in a recent interview. “We are humans. We desire to have justice.”

Sattler gave up hoping he would ever be caught. Until now.

The Alaska State Troopers on Thursday announced that rape and kidnapping charges had been filed in the case against 57-year-old Carmen D. Perzechino Jr. A former dog musher who competed in the 2004 Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race, Perzechino was a longtime Sterling resident whom the U.S. Marshals Service extradited from the Philippines to face the new charges.

Perzechino has denied committing the crime. He could not be reached for comment.

Sattler says she can’t remember hearing much, if anything, from troopers after first reporting the rape. A troopers spokeswoman described the 2001 investigation as thorough and said it included witness interviews, seizure of surveillance video and other efforts. There is nothing in trooper records that indicate why the DNA evidence was not earlier submitted for testing, she said.

Over nearly two decades, Sattler had never stopped looking over her shoulder: The man had her driver’s license and purse, left behind when she jumped from the van.

Sattler said she wants her story to be publicly known as part of an ongoing investigation by the Anchorage Daily News and ProPublica into sexual violence in Alaska. She is one of nearly 300 Alaska survivors who have come forward to share their experiences from all corners of the state.

Her assault raises questions about the Alaska State Troopers’ efforts to find a suspect when she first reported the attack, and delays in processing DNA evidence that might have solved cold cases years earlier. It also hints at a new reckoning for perpetrators. Men who escaped arrest for decades are now being caught in a net of new evidence testing as police departments dust off old rape kits and cold case investigators capitalize on advances in DNA testing and genetic genealogy.

According to the indictment filed on March 13 in state court in Kenai, but not made public until Thursday, troopers submitted evidence from Sattler’s sexual assault examination for testing in 2018 under a project to reduce Alaska’s mountain of more than 3,000 unprocessed rape kits. As of June 1, 568 previously untested rape kits collected by troopers, including the evidence in this case, had been processed by a private lab under a federally funded portion of the project.

Troopers say Perzechino is the first person to be charged with rape in an Alaska case as a result of the newly tested evidence and follow-up investigations.

A longtime resident of the small town of Sterling on the Kenai Peninsula, 55 air miles southwest of Anchorage,
Perzechino had recently sought to open a marijuana retail business. Investigators contacted Perzechino in January to talk about the 2001 attack. Two weeks later, he bought roundtrip tickets to the Philippines and skipped the return flight, an Alaska prosecutor said at his arraignment Friday.

Perzechino denied the assault and said he did not engage in any sexual activity with Sattler, the charges say.

Sattler, who said she was also sexually abused as a child by a relative, said she is sharing her story publicly now to support other survivors and fuel a conversation about rape in Alaska. The state’s rate of sex crimes is nearly three times the U.S. average. This year, the Daily News and ProPublica have been reporting how gaps in law enforcement leave many communities unprotected.

“None of this stuff is my fault,” she said. “We have to start saying something.”

“**You’re Going to Die Today**”

Here is what happened the night of the attack, according to Sattler’s recollection and a detailed account filed in state court by prosecutors.

On Jan. 19, 2001, Sattler traveled from her home in Anchorage to Soldotna, about 145 miles away on the highway, where she and friends went barhopping. The group split up and Sattler began talking to a man later identified by prosecutors as Perzechino.

Perzechino offered to give Sattler a ride, the charges say, and she accepted. They climbed into a vehicle that Sattler later described to troopers as a white or light-colored van with bucket seats.

The body of the van had no windows, Sattler noticed as they traveled the highway. She began to feel uneasy.

“After the male [Perzechino] had been driving for awhile, he began to tell [Sattler] that he wanted to have sex with her and began talking sexually aggressive to her,” prosecutors wrote in charging documents. “[Sattler] told him no, and that she wanted to go back to the bar.”

Sattler said Perzechino’s demeanor changed. He told her he was going to have sex with her, she said. He wasn’t asking.

Perzechino parked in a wooded area, Sattler said. It might have been along the highway, or a back road. “I was so disoriented. I didn’t know my way around back then.”

No cars passed. She saw no house lights.

“When I attempted to run away from his parked vehicle, he would tackle me and drag me back,” Sattler said. She remembers feeling the sting of ice on the ground after each tackle. Perzechino took her back to the van, pulled down her pants and raped her, she said. He told her, “You asked for this.”

Eventually they returned to the road, Perzechino talking as he drove. The charges say he told Sattler she was “pathetic” and threatened to kill her.

Sattler says she believed him. “He said, ‘You’re going to die today.’”

She pretended to be in shock, leaning her head against the cool window. Lying motionless. If she jumped from the van, would her legs be injured, she wondered. Could she run? She said, “I wanted to make myself as small as possible so I can figure out what he was going to do next, and I could counter that.”

The van had traveled about two miles when Sattler saw the lights of a state Department of Transportation truck.
“As we passed the DOT truck, I turned and looked at [Perzechino],” she said. The two made eye contact.

Without a word, Sattler opened the passenger door of the van and rolled, spilling out onto the highway, she said.

The state transportation employee, who had been working to place a road sign, heard the squealing of brakes. According to the charges, he looked up and saw Sattler “rolling in the road” as a van sped away.

“He’s going to kill me!” Sattler yelled. She asked the DOT driver to follow the van.

“I had wanted to figure out who he was,” she said. After a short, failed chase attempt, the DOT worker took Sattler to troopers who began a sexual assault exam. The investigator seemed uninterested, Sattler said. She believes troopers could have done more.

“I knew that they wouldn’t actively search for him,” she said.

The charges say troopers tried to identify the white van by looking for similar vehicles in the area.

“Unfortunately, it was a popular vehicle ... and [the trooper] was unable to develop a lead through this process,” trooper spokeswoman Megan Peters wrote in response to questions about the investigation. The Department of Public Safety “takes all reports of sexual assault seriously and strives to investigate each case to the highest of professional standards.”

But by January 2002, a year after the attack, the state closed the case because of a lack of leads.

“**He Did More Talking Than Running Dogs**

Perzechino, meantime, was making a life for himself in Alaska.

A short profile published on the Iditarod website says he had come to the state in 1996 from New Hampshire, where he owned a mechanical installation company. In 1999, he pleaded no contest to a misdemeanor, domestic violence assault charge and filed for bankruptcy the following year.

By the winter of 2001 Perzechino was competing in sled dog races, entering short Eagle River contests and finishing second to Lance Mackey in the Chugiak 50. Perzechino ran the Tustumena 200 and Copper Basin 300 before entering the Iditarod as a rookie.

“I’ve been a nervous wreck for the last two to three weeks,” he told a Daily News sports reporter on the day of the race. He didn't finish the 1,000-mile competition, scratching about a third of the way through. He never entered again.

“Seemed like he did more talking than running dogs,” said longtime Kenai Peninsula musher and former Iditarod champion Dean Osmar, who remembered Perzechino as an occasional presence in the area mushing scene.

“He was sort of around the fringes of it. He was buying dogs,” Osmar said.

A few weeks after the Iditarod, his wife wrote a request for a protective order saying Perzechino threatened to shoot their sled dogs after she withdrew money from a joint savings account. Among the family possessions, the filing noted, was a 1998 Ford van. It is unclear from online court records if Perzechino responded to the accusations; Kenai courthouse filings show a judge or magistrate granted the protective order.

In 2005, the couple began divorce proceedings, public records show. (His ex-wife did not respond to interview requests.) That year two women filed requests, one in Kenai and one in Anchorage state court, asking that domestic violence protective orders be placed against Perzechino.
One of the women described herself as an ex-girlfriend. She wrote Perzechino told her he would “never let me go” and had vowed to slice a tattoo from his skin and mail it to her. “He said he needs to beat someone up and it might as well be me,” she wrote.

In 2009, Perzechino pleaded guilty to a charge of misconduct involving a controlled substance. A trooper smelled marijuana during a traffic stop and seized his truck. Three years later he was visiting Anchorage when he saw a woman and yelled to her from his car. He had $20 to spend, he said.

The woman told him to pull into a parking lot and they agreed to trade money for sex, according to criminal charges filed by the city of Anchorage. The woman turned out to be an undercover police officer, and Perzechino pleaded no contest to a charge of soliciting prostitution. A magistrate ordered him to pay a $1,000 fine and serve three years of probation.

More recently, Perzechino attempted to launch a retail marijuana business, according to Marijuana Control Board records. Regulators denied the application, citing prior violations at the address.

There is no indication Perzechino was considered a sexual assault suspect prior to 2018, when the state announced an effort to reduce the backlog of untested rape kits across the state. Some of the testing, for evidence gathered by dozens of police departments, would be paid for with a one-time appropriation from the state Legislature. Testing of evidence from trooper investigations was funded with a $1.5 million federal grant.

Under the federally supported effort, troopers submitted DNA swabs collected from Sattler in 2001. It matched a known profile for Perzechino, according to the charges.

It’s unclear how and when Perzechino’s DNA came to be included in the national database, known as the Combined DNA Index System, or CODIS.

In January, an investigator with the Alaska State Troopers, Mike Burkmire, called Perzechino and asked him about the sexual assault reported all those years earlier by Sattler. Perzechino told the detective he did not go out to bars at the time and said he did not drink. He was married back then, he said, and “never had sex with anyone he picked up from a bar and that no female had ever jumped out of his van while it was moving.”

Perzechino could not explain why his DNA matched evidence collected in the case, the charges say.

Sattler had told investigators the man who attacked her was 5’8” to 5’10” and about 190 pounds. Perzechino is 5’10” and currently 225 pounds. When the cold case investigator searched vehicle records, he found Perzechino had owned a full-sized silver van in 2001, similar to the vehicle Sattler described to police and witnessed by the state transportation worker who drove her to safety.

A grand jury handed up the indictment on rape and kidnapping charges in March, with a superior court judge in Kenai issuing a warrant for Perzechino’s arrest.
“People Like Him Are Not Welcome in Our Country”

On April 4, members of the Philippine Bureau of Immigration’s Fugitive Search Unit found Perzechino in an apartment in Angeles City, Pampanga, and took him into custody at the request of the U.S. Embassy, according to a state-run news agency.

“People like him are not welcome in our country. If he did that in the U.S., then there is a possibility that he might commit the same crime in the Philippines,” Immigration Commissioner Jaime Morente of the Philippines said at the time. “Criminals like him ought to be barred from ever setting foot in our country.”

The Philippine News Agency reported that Perzechino was to be held at an immigration facility in Camp Bagong Diwa, Taguig, pending a deportation order. Troopers say he was extradited to the U.S. in August and is expected to face the charges in Alaska state courts.

The Daily News attempted to reach Perzechino, family members or an attorney representing him via several email addresses and phone numbers that he had listed in public records. One such email received a reply.

It said, in part: “Carmen has not been convicted of a crime. ... I do not communicate with Carmen and have no information as to his circumstance.” The sender did not respond to requests for additional information or explain his or her relationship to Perzechino.

At his first Alaska court appearance on the charges Friday, Perzechino asked Kenai Superior Court Judge Jennifer Wells that he be released on bail. He only lives 20 minutes from the courthouse, he said, and he promised not to leave.

Wells, who said Perzechino faces 20 to 99 years in prison if convicted, wasn't buying it.

“It looks bad, that the troopers talked to you and you went to the Philippines,” she said, setting his combined bail at $550,000.

Sattler had learned Perzechino’s name this year when called by investigators and said she never stopped worrying about encountering the man who raped her. She said she's grateful for the new effort to test rape kits and to prosecute cold cases.

She also hopes to start a conversation about sexual assault in Alaska. It was a scary step to go public with her story, she said. At the time of the attack, she kept it to herself and she knows other Alaskan women who carry similar wounds.

“I want to hold everybody’s hand who has been through something like this,” she said. “It’s not easy, but I have enough strength to go through this and I have enough to carry people through this with me. But I can’t do it alone.”

Update, Sept. 6, 2019: This story has been updated to reflect details from the suspect’s arraignment on Friday.
Days before his death in 2005, Simeon Askoak told officials how an Alaskan rural policing program was broken. His village hasn't had another permanent cop since.

RUSSIAN MISSION, Alaska — One spring day in 2005, a man in a crisp brown uniform stood before a group created by Congress to fix rural Alaska's lack of cops. In his soft-spoken way, Simeon Askoak explained his dilemma.

He was the only law enforcement officer in Russian Mission, a village of 340 people where he was born and raised. He'd worked as a village public safety officer for the previous 13 years, and while the state of Alaska covered his salary, he lacked equipment, resources and respect.

“It’s degrading me,” Askoak said of the constant search for money to pay for the basic necessities of his job. He described how his city government couldn't afford utilities for the police station, so he dug into his own pocket to buy heating oil to warm the jailhouse. When his family of seven could no longer afford the bills, the pipes at the jail froze.
Soon the water and sewer would be shut off too, he warned.

VPSOs in other riverside villages spoke of similar fears.

“We are the first responders,” Askoak said, describing the unique role VPSOs play in the state. They bust drunken drivers, bootleggers and drug dealers. They listen to children tell of being molested, stand between abusers and domestic violence victims and pull bodies from the rivers. Always unarmed and usually without backup.

Having told his story, Askoak left the meeting and flew home in a rattling bush plane above a tangle of streams and spongy tundra. Two days later, he followed a trail to a lagoon 100 yards from his front door and shot himself in the chest.

He was 50 years old. A boy found his body shrouded in newly fallen snow.

Russian Mission hasn’t had a permanent, certified police officer since. Fourteen years after his death, a generation of children in the Alaska Native village, including Askoak’s grandchildren, is growing up in a town left to fend for itself.

In a region with the highest rate of homicide and accidental death in Alaska, where half of women experience sexual assault or domestic violence, offenders here have learned they can simply hide from visiting state troopers to avoid arrest. Others face do-it-yourself justice.

Not too long ago, a group of residents tackled a man who had been firing a gun in Russian Mission. They duct-taped him and held him in the jail until the troopers landed.

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In every meaningful way, the splintered and inequitable system of rural Alaska law enforcement described by Simeon Askoak in 2005 is worse today. An investigation this year by the Anchorage Daily News and ProPublica found that one-third of communities now lack public safety officers of any kind. Some small cities without a VPSO or state trooper resort to hiring criminals as cops.

The creators of the VPSO program, which is funded by the state government and run by regional Native nonprofits, hoped to meet two goals: Grow local law enforcement by training and certifying village residents as police, while greatly increasing the number of communities with first responders. The officers were meant to be all-around lifesavers, trained to launch search parties, perform CPR and fight house fires.

The Daily News and ProPublica have found that despite heroic efforts by individual officers, the VPSO program itself is failing rural Alaskans and most Alaska villages it was intended to protect. When Askoak began working in 1992, there were more than 100 VPSOs deployed across the state.

Today? Thirty-eight and shrinking.

Instead of homegrown hires, the majority of officers are imported, unfamiliar with the regions and cultures they serve; many have never been to Alaska before.

What’s more, those few remaining VPSOs are not necessarily based in the villages where they are needed most. Whether a community gets an officer depends on several factors, such as available housing, that have nothing to do with crime rates.

If you or someone you know needs help, here are a few resources:

- Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255
- Text the Crisis Text Line from anywhere in the U.S. to reach a crisis counselor: 741741
- Copline is an international law enforcement officers’ hotline, answered by trained retired officers. The hotline: 1-800-267-5463.
Near the Canadian border, the town of Eagle has a mostly non-Native population of 80 people and sits beside a state highway. It has a VPSO.

The village of Nunapitchuk, on the other side of the state, is eight times larger with a mostly Yup’ik population and does not have one. When a man fired his rifle at a family member there in June, troopers had to fly to the village and climb on a boat to catch up with him.

Despite abysmal retention rates, high overhead costs and disagreements between the state and regional employers on how to manage and fund VPSOs, the federal government is doubling down on the program. U.S. Attorney General William P. Barr in June declared a national “law enforcement emergency” in rural Alaska, promising $10.5 million in emergency funds for “hiring, equipping and training” VPSOs and other village-based police. (At the Alaska Federation of Natives convention this month, he announced an additional $42 million in tribal grants and victims assistance.)

Alaska Native leaders say the aid is welcome and necessary, but they warn that a one-time infusion of money will not fix systemic problems.

“It will do little or nothing to actually move the needle in my view,” said Ethan Schutt, the Athabascan chief of staff for the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium and one of the commissioners who heard Askoak’s plea before his death.

The decline of the VPSO program might be less of a crisis if more state troopers protected rural Alaska. But our investigation also found half of the state’s 236 troopers work as highway patrolmen and are de facto police for suburban, mostly white communities such as the Matanuska-Susitna Borough, home of Gov. Mike Dunleavy and where former Gov. Sarah Palin got her start.

While some troopers fly from hub cities to investigate emergencies, only 25 troopers — about 11% — were posted in remote villages full time as of Sept. 30.

https://www.propublica.org/article/the-last-police-officer
All these factors result in a basic lack of first responders and emergency services in Alaska’s most remote communities. Alaska Federation of Natives President Julie Kitka said this system is unacceptable and must be overhauled with sustained and robust funding, federal partnerships and local control under village and regional leaders.

Alaska Public Safety Commissioner Amanda Price said the VPSO program in its current form may no longer be the answer.

“At what point do we say maybe this doesn’t work?” Price said in an interview in August.

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Simeon Askoak’s Yup’ik ancestors lived in southwest Alaska for thousands of years. Descended from settlers who crossed on the vast land bridge that stretched between what is now Siberia and Alaska, the Yup’ik people hunted seal and beluga along the Bering Sea coast.

More recently, Yup’ik societies began to make their way from the coast up the Yukon River, building settlements and seasonal camps. The river delivered salmon; hunters stalked caribou in the fall. One such camp became a trading post and later the village now known as Russian Mission.

Elders recall growing up here and in nearby camps, attending school in a log cabin lit by kerosene and learning English as a second language. Members of the generation after that, Askoak’s generation, were shipped to boarding schools hundreds miles away where they were punished for speaking their Native languages and suffered physical and sometimes sexual abuse.

The oldest woman in Russian Mission is 90-year-old Marie Askoak, Simeon’s aunt. There was no electricity when she was a girl, Marie said. No phones. Certainly no police, lawyers or judges that she can recall. Marie thought back. Wrapped in warm layers of clothes, a lavender qaspeq and department store fleece, her brown eyes searched the room.
Maybe there were fish and game wardens, she said finally. They began to come and take people away for hunting violations. Asked how the community historically handled crimes or disputes before the arrival of the state justice system, Marie answered in Yup’ik.

“People work together at times when things get rough here. There used to be no police officers, no nothing,” she said through an interpreter. “But there was a brotherhood and sisterhood. They work together.”

The way the village resolves conflict and fights crime is not so different now.

“If it comes down to it, we have to call Alaska state troopers,” said Daniel Askoak, the youngest of Marie’s 10 children. “But usually when something happens we come together and talk to the person.”

Sometimes it takes more than talk. When things get truly dangerous, villagers have a choice: hunker down and wait for troopers to arrive by plane or take matters into their own hands.

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Across Alaska, communities that once had certified police thanks to the VPSO program now make do with low-paid, untrained police or no law enforcement all.

Alakanuk, a Yup’ik village of 728 people at the mouth of the Yukon River, had a VPSO in town until recently. In January, once he was gone, a man in the village was stabbed in the chest by a family member. The next month, on Valentine’s Day, a 43-year-old was said to have committed rape, kidnapping and assault, and to have given alcohol to a minor, according to charges filed in state court. In July, a man jumped into a river slough and drowned.

The Western Alaska region that includes Alakanuk and Russian Mission employed about 20 VPSOs when Simeon Askoak testified in 2005. Now four remain among some 48 villages.
The southwest Alaska village of Manokotak once had two VPSOs; today it has none. In 2013, one of the officers was shot to death while checking on a man who was thought to be suicidal. The need for certified police officers remains as great as ever. A man holding a 1-month-old child in his arms punched two village elders last fall and had to be restrained by family members of the victims, according to troopers. A shooting followed in July. The month after that, troopers surrounded the house of a man threatening to “go on a killing spree” if anyone came inside.

Russian Mission has had a few city-hired village police officers over the years, residents say, but no permanent VPSOs since Askoak. His absence is felt in a thousand ways. One series of attacks involving a young couple illustrates the difference between a village with a trusted local police officer, and one that must rely on troopers working an hour away.

In 2004, the year before Askoak’s death, someone called 911 to say that a muscular former basketball star named Lester Pitka had slammed his 16-year-old girlfriend’s head to the floor. In an affidavit, Askoak wrote that he arrived at the scene three minutes later, saw Pitka on top of the girl and stopped the beating.

Other VPSOs called Askoak “the sweet talker” because he convinced people they shouldn’t run when facing arrest, his widow said. “If you do that, it’ll just be another addition to your charges,” he would say.

“He’d tell them, ‘I don’t want you to do this because I care about you.’”

The man he arrested was his nephew. Interviewed in a state prison, Pitka said by phone that he understood and held no grudges. “It was never personal with him. He was just doing his job.”

In the years following Askoak’s death, public records suggest Pitka learned he had plenty of time to disappear before troopers could arrive to investigate. In 2007, a woman called troopers to report that Pitka, then her boyfriend, had spit in her face and yanked her hair at the city office. With no police in town, the woman said, she was afraid for her safety and planned to stay with her mother until help arrived.

When the trooper landed the next day, Pitka was nowhere to be found.

Russian Mission is reachable by plane year-round, by snowmobile in the winter and by boat in the summer. (Loren Holmes/ADN)
“I searched throughout Russian Mission ... but was unable to locate him,” the trooper wrote in an affidavit filed in state district court. “I was advised by several witnesses that he was hiding to avoid arrest.”

The trooper handed the victim a pamphlet about domestic violence and flew home. A judge issued a warrant for Pitka’s arrest, but there was no certified officer to serve it. Pitka avoided capture for the next two weeks.

As Russian Mission grew accustomed to life without a cop of any kind, the attacks by Pitka continued. Sometimes troopers came within two hours. Sometimes not for days.

At 3 p.m. on Nov. 24, 2009, a woman called 911, screaming. Pitka could be heard in the background, troopers wrote. The line went dead.

A trooper flew to the village on a chartered plane, landing an hour and 20 minutes after the 911 call. He found the victim crying at the village City Hall.

“She stated Lester said he was going to beat her up, and if troopers showed up he would hide so he could not be found,” according to the charges. “And after that he would beat her up so that he would have a reason to go to jail.”

The following year, Pitka yanked the same woman by the hair so hard that a clump came loose the next time she combed. She was seven months pregnant at the time. There is no record of troopers flying to the village until 11 days later. He pleaded guilty to domestic violence assault. In 2012, Pitka pleaded guilty to a felony assault charge after a pregnant woman called for help to say he had put a cigarette out on her cheek.

Today, Pitka is in prison awaiting trial on a new felony domestic violence charge. He is accused of choking a woman in front of her children April 24 in Juneau. (In that case, the woman called 911 and a Juneau police officer immediately took him into custody. He has pleaded not guilty.)

Pitka declined to talk about specific details of various cases against him, other than to say they were all alcohol related. But he said he felt troopers — and the state’s justice system overall — assume Alaska Native suspects are guilty.

“I’d rather have someone like Simmy. A VPSO, a Native,” Pitka said. “He would want to help somebody rather than put them in jail.”

Pitka wouldn't say where he hid, or how, but the village sits along a steep hillside overlooking the curve of the Yukon River, with countless islands and trails spreading in every direction for 100 miles. In Russian Mission and other Western Alaska villages, residents said the tactic of hiding from troopers to avoid arrest remains common.

“They can run anywhere in the trees back here, or on a boat out to the fish camps, knowing the troopers won’t go after them,” said Darlene Nickoli, who works at the Russian Mission tribal office.

Things were different when Simeon Askoak was alive, she recalled.

“He knew the places where they go.”

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When the Russian Mission City Council talked about finding a VPSO for the village in 1992, they agreed that Simeon Askoak, kind and careful, would be a good choice.

Some 80% of the community was related to Simeon by blood or marriage, said Barbie Atchak, Simeon’s widow. At the meeting he warned the group there would be no favorites. “It will be my job to make arrests, family or not.”

In 2004, the Daily News interviewed Askoak in Russian Mission for a story about the village’s effort to introduce traditional Yup’ik skills into the classroom. The classes seemed to help fight crime, he said at the time.

https://www.propublica.org/article/the-last-police-officer
As teenagers learned to snare marten and skin beaver or build smokehouses to dry strips of salmon the color of tangerines, he noticed fewer kids caused trouble at night. He found himself handing out fewer tickets for underage drinking.

“I’ve seen [changes] even in my own boy,” said Askoak, whose son Nicephore was in the 10th grade. “He’s looking forward to going to school every day now. Before that, I honestly thought he would be dropping out.”

Privately, Askoak struggled. He worried about money. Plus every call for service in the village carried the possibility of angry encounters later at the store, on the hillside trails, in church. He’d received death threats.

Still there was something else.

“He kept asking me if anything happened to me when I was in school, which was the year before we met,” Atchak said.

As children both had attended the Wrangell Institute, a Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding school for village children 5 to 15 years old. In interviews with former students, University of Alaska Anchorage researchers heard more reports of beatings and sexual abuse at the island institute than at any other school in Alaska.

Some described a “concentration camp-like atmosphere,” recalling how larger boys were given razor straps to beat younger boys who were caught singing Native songs. In 2005, the year the study published, Simeon began to ask his wife about her time there.

“Did anything happen to you in Wrangell?”

No.

Simeon kept at it. The couple had been married almost 30 years. This subject had never surfaced before and suddenly he wouldn’t let it go. Finally Atchak pressed him.

“What kind of thing are you looking for?”

“When I was there,” Simeon began, “I went to an appointment and at the time there was a male doctor. I got sexually abused at the [school] clinic.”

Simeon recently had heard from old classmates, he told his wife. They had been sexually abused too. “That was about two weeks before he committed suicide,” Atchak said.

People living in Southwest Alaska, the region that includes Russian Mission and dozens of Yup’ik villages along the Yukon and Kuskokwim rivers, kill themselves at a rate three times the national average. Alaska Native men are particularly at risk.

There was a time when Atchak thought about suicide too. While growing up in the Tlingit village of Angoon in Southeast Alaska, she said, five different men sexually assaulted her on different occasions. She’s since been to counseling and volunteers to speak publicly about suicide and sexual abuse in Bethel.

“I learned that it wasn’t my fault that it happened to me,” she said. The thing she learned about suicide: there is never a single cause.

No one was ever charged with the sexual abuse of Simeon as a boy at the boarding school. None of the five men were charged with sexually assaulting his wife when she was a girl. In the village, the rape of a family member went unprosecuted when the two men claimed the encounter was consensual, Atchak said.

Simeon told the family not to take revenge.
“He didn’t want anybody to do anything to those guys,” Atchak said. “[He said] that God will take care of it when they come face to face.”

In Russian Mission today, villagers say they sometimes have no choice but to take the law into their own hands.

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Basil Larson shifted his weight on the runners of a homemade dog sled as eight panting huskies carried him across the frozen Yukon River on a Thursday in March. The afternoon was silent except for the wind and the dry sound of the sled gliding on snow, like the tearing of paper.

The musher parked and set to making breakfast for the team, a stew of fish and moose meat (the fur still attached) and warmed it in a steel drum. With no cop in town, residents like Larson are sometimes deputized by elders or relatives to handle trouble, he explained.

“If somebody is going nuts in one of my aunties’ or relatives’ house and they need some help, I’ll stomp on in and straighten ’em out,” Larson said, mixing the stew with a 6-foot stick.

Watching from bare branches, ravens warbled and croaked.

“You just challenge them until their tail goes between their legs,” he said of people who must be restrained until troopers can fly in. “Try to calm them down and talk them down and use physical force if you have to.”

Larson, 35, grew up here. Playful and winking, a bear in overalls. He’s had to bring people to the City Hall building or the new public safety building, he said. Built after Simeon Askoak’s suicide, the two unpainted jail cells are mostly used by visiting troopers.

When a reporter asked for a tour in mid-March, it took officials a day to find the key. “We have a cop shop but no cops,” Larson said.

Under a state law, Mayor Sheila Minock is the chief of law enforcement for Russian Mission. A former health aide, she said neighbors like Larson are happy to help in a crisis.

This spring, a 10-year-old had to stop his father from choking a woman in his home. The victim fled the village without her belongings, according to a request filed for a domestic violence restraining order. The month after that, a father and his friend were able to restrain a 19-year-old who tried to drive drunk and had armed himself with a loaded 9 mm handgun. When the same teenager punched his sister in the face in September, bad weather prevented a Fairbanks trooper from flying in to investigate for two days.

The village would love to have a VPSO again to handle these problems, the mayor said. That would require the regional nonprofit employer, Association of Village Council Presidents, to recruit, hire and deploy someone to the community.

Finding anyone willing to lift the burden full time is a challenge, especially following Askoak’s suicide, which villagers attributed to job strain. His widow said such things are never so simple.

https://www.propublica.org/article/the-last-police-officer
Barbie Atchak doesn’t remember any sounds on the morning that her husband shot himself. She had left the house to return a few DVDs, and she returned to find Simeon gone.

Maybe he’d walked to his sister’s house, where the church was holding choir practice.

“I stepped out on the porch and looked around to see if he might have been walking anywhere,” Atchak said. As she strolled toward the village center, someone stopped her. There had been a discovery.

No footprints surrounded Simeon’s body in the fresh snow. Troopers investigated and declared it suicide. The Alaska Department of Public Safety soon absolved itself.

In an opinion column published in the Daily News a month after Simeon’s death, the commissioner of public safety at the time, Bill Tandeske, wrote that his troopers concluded the suicide was not related to the VPSO program despite Simeon’s sharp criticism of the program 48 hours before taking his own life.

Tandeske did not say what that conclusion was based on. “Funding for the VPSO program as it is currently operating is adequate. I would like nothing better than to seek additional dollars for the program, but I’m not going to do so until we have qualified VPSOs to fill the positions,” he wrote. “The unfortunate death of Simeon Askoak leaves one more position to fill.”

Like many current and former public safety officials, Tandeske now says the program that Askoak worked for has morphed into something it was never intended to be, and a course correction is needed.

“Ultimately, with the push over time for more law enforcement services, is the VPSO program the appropriate platform to build upon?” Tandeske asked in an interview in September. “These issues have [been] going round and round for some time. Simply throwing more money at it is not the answer.”

* * *

Nicephore Askoak, the son of Simeon Askoak, with his family. (Loren Holmes/ADN)
When Simeon was alive, the family always traveled together. Picking berries, hunting, cutting fish. Following his death they scattered.

Atchak moved to Bethel and remarried; her husband is the head of search and rescue for the region. Her son began to raise his family in the home she’d shared with Simeon.

Nicephore Askoak — the boy who Simeon said was eager to go to school to learn Yup’ik hunting skills — is now 31. On a recent weeknight he returned from a day of trapping, hanging his parka alongside the family rifles and carrying two limp martens in his arms.

He said he hopes people remember his father as a kind man, and he can recall missing him when Simeon went away for VPSO training. While still in high school, Nicephore told a Daily News reporter he’d grown tired of village life and was thinking of moving.

After the suicide he stayed. For a time, he attempted to follow in his father’s footsteps. Nicephore worked for 18 months as a city police officer, recruited by the Russian Mission city manager. People expected him to stop violent encounters and investigate felonies as his father had.

On the day he was called to a home and discovered the suicide of a friend, he quit for good.

Asked about his father’s death, Nicephore said that all these years later he doesn’t know what to say about it. After a long pause, he stood from the kitchen table, excusing himself to go prepare for dinner.

It’d been a long day, he said, and there was still much to do.