

Written Testimony of Mr. Gerad Godfrey for June 10, 2015, U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs oversight hearing on “Addressing the Need for Victim Services in Indian Country.”

## Rural Interior Alaska / Tanana Chiefs Conference Region

### 1. About Rural Interior Alaska / TCC Region

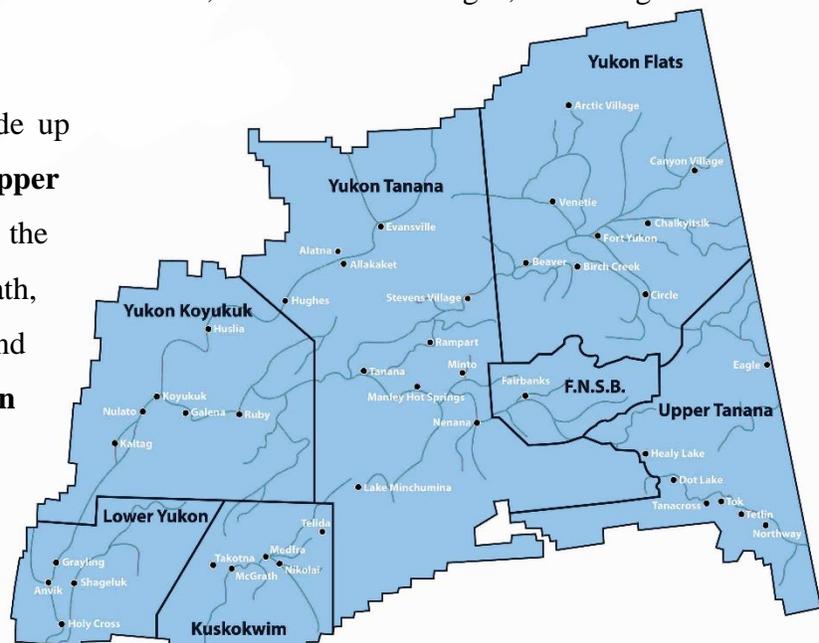
Tanana Chiefs Conference (TCC) is a regional Native non-profit corporation in the state of Alaska that provides health and social services to 42 villages in interior Alaska, 37 of which are federally recognized tribes. The TCC region follows the traditional boundaries of the interior Alaska Athabaskan people. The region is spread across about 235,000 square miles, which is equal to about 37 percent of the State of Alaska and just slightly smaller than the state of Texas, and about ten times the area of the Navajo Nation- the largest reservation in the lower 48 states.

The tribes in the region are Athabaskan Indian that range in population from 75 to 700 members. Most villages are along the major river systems of Alaska’s interior and the distances between communities can be vast. A majority of the villages are only accessible by small aircraft, and sometimes by boats during the summer months. Seven of the tribes are on the road system, with travel time from Fairbanks ranging from one to eight hours. In some villages, road access is over very rough gravel that makes travel difficult and dangerous depending on the season.



The total population of Native people in the TCC region is approximately 12,000. About half live in the urban hub center of Fairbanks, with the remaining 6,000 living in rural villages.

The TCC region is made up of six subregions. The **Upper Kuskokwim** subregion contains the following villages: McGrath, Medfra, Nikolai, Takotana and Telida. The **Lower Yukon**



subregion contains the following villages: Anvik, Grayling, Holy Cross and Shageluk. The **Upper Tanana** subregion contains the following villages: Dot Lake, Eagle, Healy Lake, Northway, Tanacross, Tetlin and Tok. The **Yukon Flats** subregion contains the following villages: Arctic Village, Beaver, Birch Creek, Canyon Village, Chalkyitsik, Circle, Fort Yukon and Venetie. The **Yukon Koyukuk** subregion contains following villages: Galena, Huslia, Kaltag, Koyukuk, Nulato and Ruby. The **Yukon Tanana** subregion is made of up of Alatna, Allakaket, Evansville, Fairbanks, Hughes, Lake Minchumina, Manley Hot Springs, Minto, Nenana, Rampart, Stevens Village and Tanana.

The economies in the region are predominantly subsistence hunting, fishing and gathering, and seasonal employment. Unemployment rates in the villages are high, at least quadruple the national and state rates. Many families live at or below the poverty level. The cost of living in villages is estimated to be 30-40 percent higher than the cost of living in Anchorage or Fairbanks. Accessibility to common services such as public safety, health, and education are often lacking or insufficient in addressing some of the social issues people face in the villages. In the winter months, harsh weather conditions (temperature extremes of -55) limit the availability and delivery of basic goods and services.

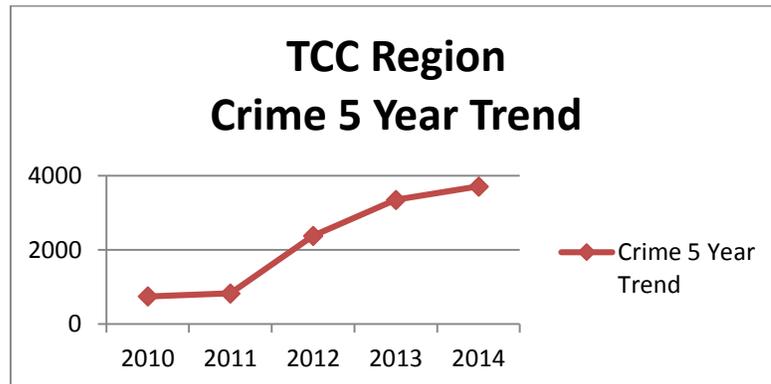
2. Law Enforcement in the Region: TCC's Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) Program and the Alaska State Troopers

TCC's VPSO Program provides public safety for rural communities in the region through a diverse array of public safety functions that include more than just law enforcement duties and activities. The presence of VPSOs in rural communities has had a significant impact on improving the quality of life, health, and safety in the villages. Most villages in the TCC region do not have any existing public safety services or infrastructure such as fire prevention and suppression, emergency medical services, search and rescue, and law enforcement officers or facilities. Those communities that may not require or do not have the resources to support a full time VPSO still have needs for other public safety services including public safety education, Drug and Alcohol Resistance Education (DARE), emergency preparedness plans, home safety inspection plans, school resource officers, hunter's safety, emergency responses and officer presence.

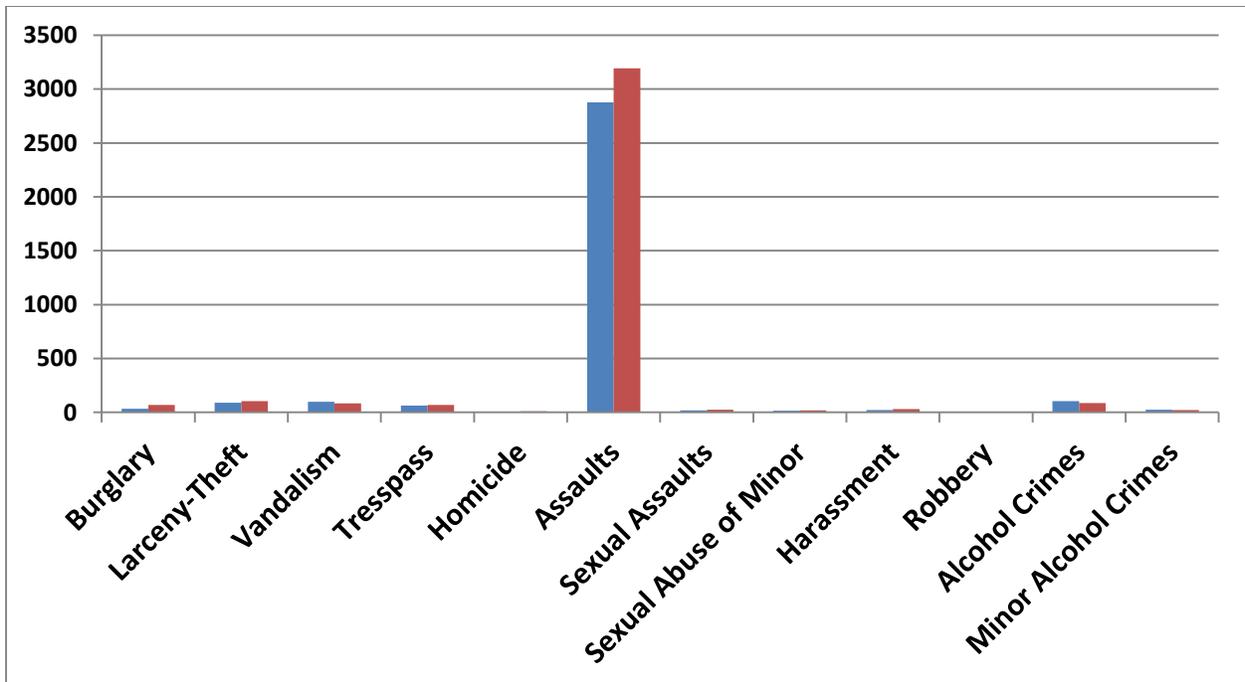
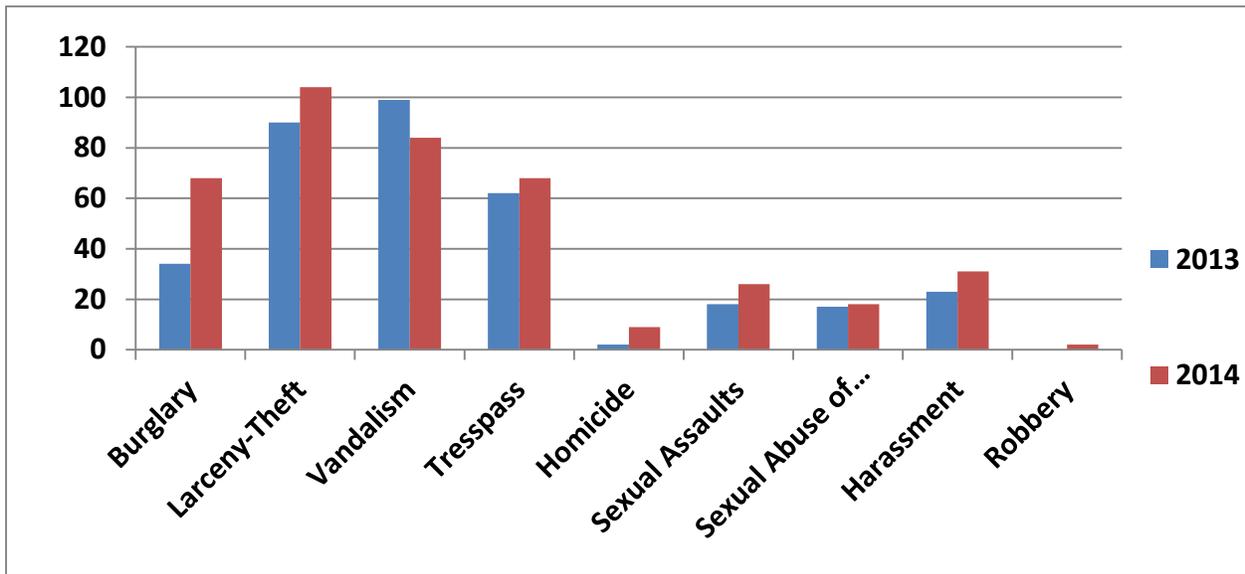
TCC currently has unarmed VPSOs designated to 11 villages; Tanana, Eagle, Allakaket, Tetlin, Fort Yukon, Nulato, McGrath, Huslia, Galena Rover, Minto, and Northway. VPSO rovers serve the remaining communities in the region. The VPSO program works in conjunction with the Alaska State Troopers to meet the public safety needs in rural communities. Alaska State Trooper detachments or service areas are based out of the Fairbanks Trooper Post and the Bethel Trooper Post, both of which are significant distances away from the rural communities.

### 3. Rising Crime in the TCC Rural Region

VPSOs and Alaska State Troopers are doing a tremendous job given their limited resources and adverse working conditions. Despite their best efforts, crime is on the rise (or is likely being reported more with the increase of VPSOs) in TCC's villages over the past 5 years. Consistent with the trend, assault, homicide, sexual assault, harassment, burglary, and theft have all increased from 2010 to 2014. Of particular concern is assaults make up the majority of reported crimes, which means there is always at least one victim.



### TCC Rural Region Crime Comparison of 2013 to 2014<sup>1</sup>



#### 4. Need for Victim Services in TCC Region

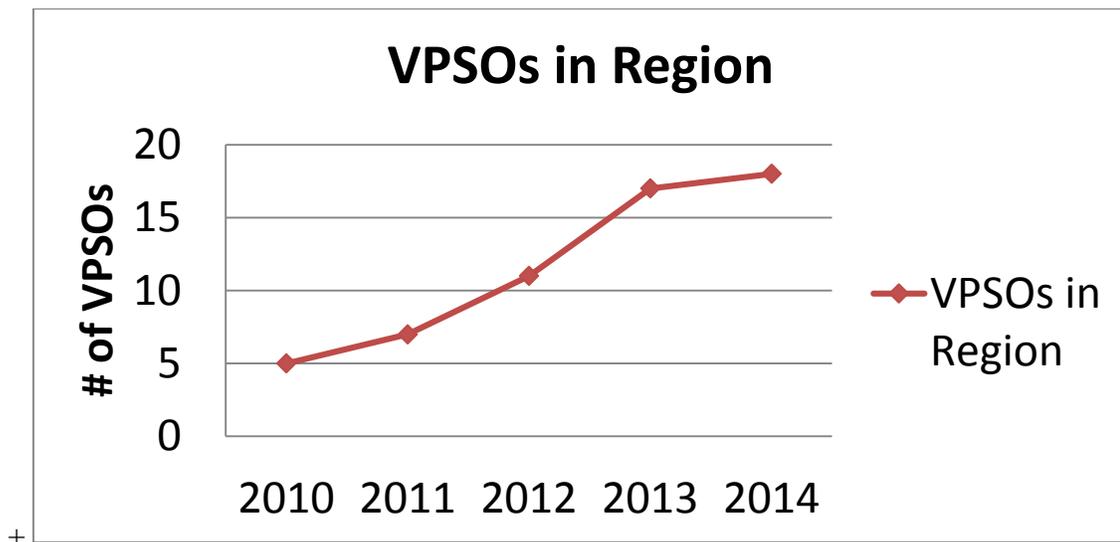
Victim services in rural Alaska are needed more than ever to keep individuals and families safe. An analysis of the statistics above is disturbing: In 2014, of the 6,000 rural

<sup>1</sup> Statistics refer strictly to the 6,000 people living in the TCC Rural Region and exclude Fairbanks, AK and Tok, AK.

residents residing in the TCC rural region, more than 3,100 incidents of violent crimes to the person occurred. Stated more bluntly, more than 51% of all people living in villages were victims of violent crimes. Looking at the other side of the coin is equally shocking: More than 51% of all people living the villages were perpetrators of violent crimes.

The causes for violence in Alaska Native villages vary. TCC VPSO Coordinator Sargent Jody Potts believes that law enforcement is dealing with the direct results of historical and generational trauma in rural communities. Children are being raised in environments where drugs, alcohol abuse, and violence are tolerated because offenders are not held accountable and victims have no access to meaningful services.

Whatever the core cause are, victims' service needs must be addressed now. First and foremost, every village resident must be protected. Every village must have a law enforcement officer present in the community. The TCC Five Year Crime Trend graph above indicates that crime has increased each year since 2010. What has also increased each year since 2010 is the number of VPSOs in rural communities. This statistic reveals that when rural residents have access to law enforcement in their community, they use it. When they do not have access, it is less likely that crime is reported.



If law enforcement cannot physically be in every rural village, residents must have access to reliable telecommunication services to contact law enforcement agencies and emergency services. Many villages in the TCC region do not have reliable long distance

telephone and internet services. The only reliable telephone and internet access are located in the village clinic or school. This does little good to a victim who needs immediate help and cannot access the clinic or school. This could be the difference between life and death. There should be no reason why rural residents cannot have the same access to reliable telecommunications in their home as the clinic or school located in the same community. However, due to various federal regulations that govern telephone and internet access to health clinics and schools, village residents are prohibited from “tapping” into the same reliable access points.<sup>2</sup> This must be addressed.

Next, all individual victim focused services must consider the realities of living in an Alaska Native village and be culturally relevant. For example, in most villages, everyone knows each other. Victims may refuse medical care because the village’s sole health aide is also the perpetrator’s sister, mother, aunt, or other relative. Victims must have access to immediate medical care where they will feel safe and comfortable.

Victim retaliation and intimidation are other factors that must be considered. For example, a perpetrator or his family may retaliate by excluding the victim from necessary subsistence activities. This leaves the victim without valuable food resources for the winter and causes a financial burden because substitute foods must be purchased. The creation of a fund that helps cover the costs of subsistence activities by volunteers would be a way to ensure that victims still have access to subsistence foods while saving limited financial resources.

Lastly, in many domestic violence and other assault cases, perpetrators intimidate victims by refusing to leave the village or even the same home they share with the victim, while a criminal investigation is ongoing. Investigations can often last months. Victims have no choice but to stay in the same village or home because they do not have anywhere to go or the resources to support their children on their own. Creating and implementing services to victims must consider this reality. Collaborations with Tribal governments, Tribal courts, and law enforcement agencies are suggested when addressing this issue.

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<sup>2</sup> See FCC Rules, Regulations, and Orders administered by the Universal Service Administrative Company at <http://www.usac.org/about/tools/fcc/default.aspx>