



State of Vermont
Department of Public Safety
45 State Drive
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<http://dps.vermont.gov/>

June 8, 2022

Dear Agency and Department Heads:

Staffing shortages at the Westminster Communication Center have reached a point that requires operational changes to maintain essential services. This memo outlines current challenges, highlights items that have been or will be implemented, and identifies immediate steps for partner agencies to take to ensure the continuity of safe, efficient and coordinated delivery of public safety services to Vermonters.

Current situation at Westminster

- Current staffing: 18 out of 28 FTE positions = 36% vacancy rate
 - 2 resignations this week with two-week notice = 43% vacancy rate
 - 3 planned retirements over the next three months = 54% vacancy rate

Work environment at Westminster

- The current staff is doing an incredible job maintaining high standards of service and professionalism.
- Recruiting efforts are ongoing but not keeping up with the job demand.
- Calls for mental health services and violent crime have increased at a significant rate.
- Non-emergency/administrative call volume also is increasing.
- Dispatchers are working mandatory overtime, extended shifts and have limited days off.

Efforts taken so far or in progress:

- Shifting workload from Westminster to other sections within DPS.
- Updating DPS phone system to reduce non-emergency/administrative telephone call volume.
- Continuing with efforts to stand up new regional dispatching centers.
- Improved dispatcher pay with various incentives.
- Establishing a 12-hour shift so centers can operate with fewer staff.

Immediate Action Items for Departments:

- Require jurisdictions take all non-emergency/administrative calls, not forwarding those calls into an emergency communications center.
 - Business-related calls on administrative phone lines should be answered locally instead of being routed to the PSAPs. Administrative calls will be routed back automatically to the local agency. We encourage agencies to create voice mail systems that advise caller to contact a state PSAP IF they require a first responder but do not direct callers to the PSAP for other calls such as seeking a call back from an employee, passing along a concern or complaint, or general inquiries not related to the need for an immediate response.
- Require fire and EMS agencies handle secondary communication needs after initial dispatch is received and acknowledged unless mutual aid is requested or additional agencies or resources are needed.
- Request agencies explore alternate dispatching services when possible, and accelerate work to move to a statewide system of regional communications as swiftly as possible.
- Require law enforcement agencies and officers maximize the benefits and efficacy of Valcour for routine queries such as records checks, and reduce this type of administrative phone and radio traffic into the dispatch centers.



Over the past two years Vermont's first responder community has worked together to solve problems and overcome unprecedented challenges. We stand united and will continue to find creative solutions that enable us to provide exceptional emergency services in Vermont.

Thank you for your service.

Sincerely,



Michael Schirling
Commissioner



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DPS response to VLCT concerns as expressed in newsletter article week of 2/25/22:

This detail, relating to questions posed, supplements, and often reiterates, the DPS position paper on the transition to statewide regional communications. Multiple documents are available at <https://dps.vermont.gov/modernization>. We strongly encourage readers to visit this site to see the extensive planning documents available.

1. DPS needs to provide a complete inventory of the agencies and departments affected by the proposal.
 - a. *Between the two PSAPs, VSP currently dispatches for over 100 agencies including state agencies. Attached is a list of all agencies receiving this free service.*
 - b. *The attached list includes the number of incidents handled by VSP for each county in 2018. The incident numbers provided are relatively consistent throughout the years.*

2. The department also needs to disclose the names and numbers of agencies that currently receive part-time dispatching services from the state.

Seven (7) departments within the attached list currently receive part time dispatching from VSP. They include Williston PD, Swanton PD, Northfield PD, Wilmington PD, Dover PD, Middlebury PD, and Regional Ambulance.

3. A complete understanding of the current DPS budget for dispatching would help inform everyone about what the department's future budget should be and for regional dispatch centers, as well as how departmental savings would be applied once the state gets out of the business of dispatching for non-state entities.

The DPS budget will evolve as the statewide transition to regional communications occurs. It is generally anticipated that there will be an approximately 35% saving in state dispatch costs. This estimate does not correlate directly to the roughly 50% of dispatch work to transition to regional centers, in part because the current staffing and budget levels are insufficient to support the current scope of operations – put more succinctly the current state-run centers are understaffed and underfunded.

4. The costs of running dispatching services will continue beyond this 24-to-36-month period, yet there is no proposal for the state to provide any funding to help regional centers once the transition is complete.

Since the beginning of this discussion with the agency heads, Commissioner Schirling has been very clear that the State is not appropriately positioned to propose funding for agencies once they leave the VSP PSAPs. Because of the variety of existing funding mechanisms and governance structures, it is prudent for agency heads to discuss with their appropriate Towns/Select Boards/City Leaders. Commissioner Schirling has also observed that Governor Scott would not likely support any new taxes or fees on Vermonters. However, a statewide funding mechanism for emergency communications could be a viable way of approaching these statewide costs IF all existing taxes and fees to fund these operations were returned to taxpayers. These points have been reiterated numerous times in multiple meetings with all agency heads.

5. All agencies and municipalities need to know how the \$11 million will facilitate this transition and how that money would be allocated.

A multi-disciplinary working group has already begun to develop a grant-style application and RFP for the proposed \$11M transitional funding to statewide regional communications. Agency heads from various departments, the VSP dispatch commander and members of the Department of Homeland Security are in the final phases of finishing this product so that we can move quickly if the funds are approved.

The monies will be distributed based on the needs of the agency or entity hosting the proposed center. Once the final process has been completed this will be shared with all stakeholders so they can start to prepare their application.

More detail on the three areas of funding can be found in the attached overview of the transition to regional communications.

6. Most importantly, agencies and municipalities need to know what entities would need to run these regional centers, or even if they will be operational within this very narrow timeframe.

It is very likely that most of the nine regional centers envisioned could be operational within 36 months, most far earlier than that. It is important to note that this effort to transition to a statewide network of regional centers is the first in history to propose funding for a transition to centers that have long been envisioned and many that are ready to begin operations as soon as funding is received.

There are four existing dispatch centers that already operate in a regional manner, similar to what is envisioned across the state. These centers are in Hartford, Lamoille County, Shelburne and St. Albans.

There are five proposed new regional centers. All of these sites are in various stages of planning. Four of the five are in advanced stages of development after years (in some cases decades) of work toward this goal.

- a. *Chittenden County has created a governance structure and has space identified for a regional center. Funding is needed for infrastructure to make the center operational. More detail is available from the Chittenden County Public Safety Authority.*
- b. *Essex (and Orleans) County have indicated that they are ready to begin taking on more agencies with minimal investments. For more information contact Chief Travis Bingham.*

- c. *Orange County has been identified as a likely site for a regional dispatch center with contracted services available and Sheriff Bohnyak leading that effort.*
 - d. *Washington County has done years of planning to host a Central Vermont Communications Center. The Montpelier Police Department is deep in the planning phase of engineering, space assessments, and equipment needs assessments and would be operational within months of receiving funding. For more information contact Chief Brian Peete.*
 - e. *Rutland County has been identified as the final site for a regional center and is in the early stages of developing that concept. This center would take up to 36 months to plan and fully execute.*
7. Those affected have had little input into the proposal and rather have been forced to simply accept that the proposal is moving forward. Communities have not even been apprised of what the impact on municipal, county, and non-profit budgets – both near term and into the future – will be.

In 2020 DPS held four statewide community meetings with all that wished to share or provide input into VSP dispatching capabilities. The meetings were attended by several citizens of Vermont. For the past six months, all first responder agency heads, including those not dispatched by VSP, have been invited to a series of ongoing meetings to address this issue. The purpose of these meetings has been to generate ideas from local agencies providing a path forward where agencies and local authorities decide on their future rather than the State dictating their progress.

At each of these meetings, Commissioner Schirling has clearly stated the endgame and desired time frame: for VSP to be out of the business of dispatching for non-State entities within 36 months. He has been very clear and up front with all agency heads during these meetings. He has routinely asked for feedback, ideas, and ways to improve the process.

Each meeting, begun during the summer of 2021 and continuing to now, has been attended by as many as 65 public safety agency leads or representatives at a time.

Many agencies have been very involved and are active working partners with this effort. Others have not engaged the process or attended one meeting.

Over the past 6 months there have been at least 4 meetings where all first responder agency heads and representatives of VLCT have been invited. Additionally, Captain Burnham has attended meetings in the Northeast Kingdom and Rutland County where town officials and agency heads have met to discuss this issue.

These meetings continue to happen however, with the legislature in session, they have slowed. It should be noted and stressed that this has been a topic of conversation for many years. The lack of action over the past 5 decades on this topic likely has contributed to atrophy on the part of public safety leaders – they simply do not believe there will be action, so they have chosen not to engage in a crucial conversation that has been tabled more than a dozen times in the past with a lack of state action.

8. This proposal is not merely a line item in a department's overall budget, but rather a significant shift in how emergency dispatch services would be provided across the state.

The current infrastructure for VSP dispatching is extremely complex and unsustainable due to the high number of dispatched agencies. Staffing issues, COVID 19, and a dwindling applicant pool has exacerbated this issue. Creating Regional Dispatch centers is in line with what state sponsored studies have suggested for the past 50 years. It is not a significant shift in dispatching methodology, this plan merely disperses the number of agencies being dispatched across a more sustainable number of regionally diverse centers with access to a wider array of workforce. New to this statewide equation is newer technology and infrastructure that enable agencies to be dispatched from any location. DPS has agreed to explore new centers being housed in state-owned infrastructure to keep start up and ongoing costs to a minimum, if possible.

Moving to regional centers will also address the perennial issue of inequity in pay for service. Currently, some municipalities or agencies get dispatching service for free, and others do not.

Beyond concerns raised in VLCT newsletter:

For the past three years, DPS has consistently demonstrated that it is prioritizing support for public safety operations statewide. The State has done the following to pave the way to regional communications centers:

1. Stopped charging agencies for access to information systems. DPS last charged for VLETS access in FY19 and for VIBRS access in FY20 saving local and county agencies approximately \$250,000 annually.
2. Taken on the entire cost of statewide CAD/RMS support in FY22, saving local and county agencies over \$430,000 annually.
3. Paying for emergent use of translators statewide.
4. Allow use of State contracts to purchase communications infrastructure such as radios and consoles.
5. Allow agencies to use existing State infrastructure such as radio towers, if desired.
6. Offered State owned real estate for consideration when evaluating locations of regional communications centers.
7. Provided ongoing technical assistance and guidance in creation of regional centers. The DPS Radio Technology Services Unit is actively engaged with multiple emerging regional centers. DPS is committed to providing this technical support for the first three years of development of these centers, and likely beyond.
8. Providing surplus equipment and spare parts for use by communications centers.
9. Created a new priority within Homeland Security Unit grant streams for regional, interoperable communications centers. This funding opportunity could augment some centers share of the State funds.
10. Committed to finding all available federal funding streams to off set the cost of these projects and provide funding to ease the transition to regional centers.
11. Continuing to create no cost statewide databases for 24-hour access to warrants and protection orders.

For further information on this document or anything else related to Regional Dispatch please contact Deputy Commissioner Jennifer Morrison at jennifer.morrison@vermont.gov.