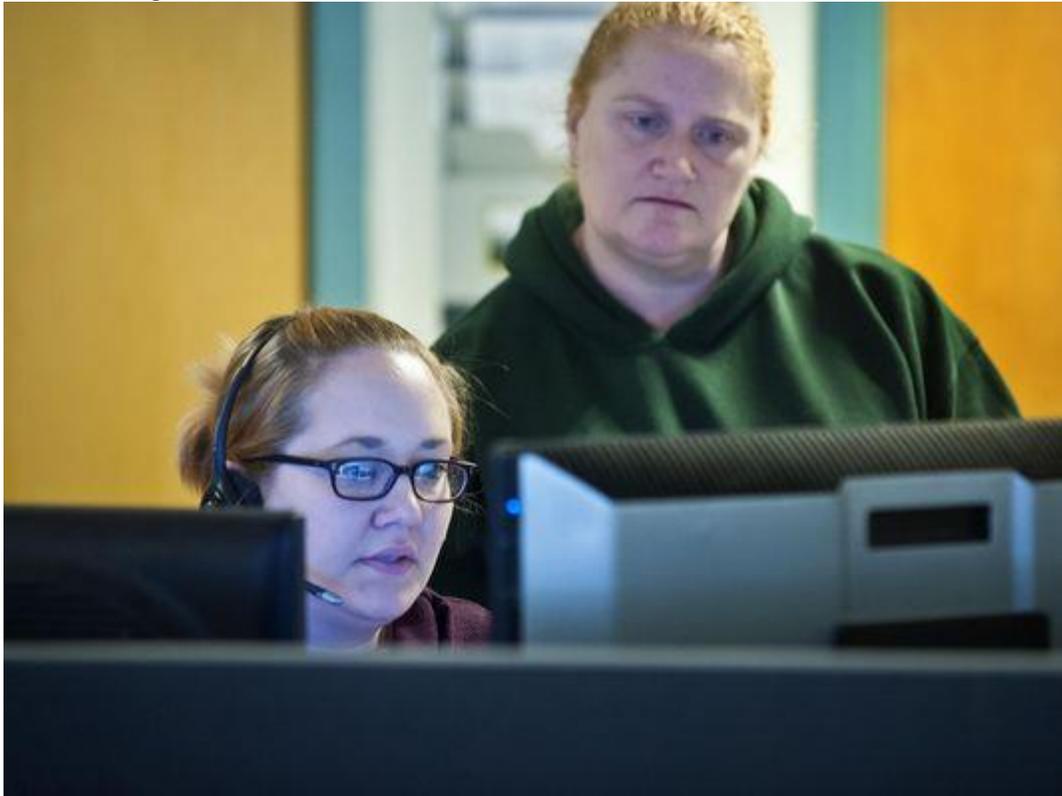


# Firefighters: Save 911 dispatch centers

Mike Donoghue, Free Press Staff Writer 7:52 a.m. EDT March 17, 2015



(Photo: GLENN RUSSELL/FREE PRESS FILE)

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Vermont firefighters and emergency medical services personnel are joining the fight to try to keep open the 911 dispatch centers in Derby and Rutland.

The Vermont State Firefighters Association and the Professional Firefighters of Vermont are among the groups asking legislators to block consolidation of four state-operated 911 call centers to two.

Supporters for the dispatchers are planning a rally at the Statehouse at 5 p.m. Tuesday. The Senate and House government operations committees will hold a joint hearing on the proposal at 5:30 p.m.

"Firefighters and EMS workers all across Vermont count on the experience of these highly trained call takers and dispatchers to perform our jobs and ensure

the safety of the public and the emergency workers," Burlington Lt. Ben O'Brien said in a letter from the Professional Firefighters of Vermont.

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The Vermont State Firefighters Association, which represents most volunteers throughout Vermont has been encouraging its members to write to state senators and representatives, according to Hinesburg Volunteer Fire Chief Al Barber.

"The consolidation plan will impact not only the State Police, but ALL emergency services covering over 200 towns in Vermont and numerous response agencies across the State," Barber said in an email.

Barber said the fire association has proposed other cost saving measures, including a hiring freeze and stretching the replacement schedule for state police vehicles.

Vermont Public Safety Commissioner Keith Flynn has proposed closing the dispatch centers in Derby and Rutland and transferring the phone calls and radio communications to the dispatch centers in Williston and Rockingham.

The plan is designed to save \$1.7 million, which had been requested by Gov. Peter Shumlin, Flynn has said.

The Shumlin administration last week directed the Vermont Public Safety Department to make another \$1,046,728 in cuts by Tuesday afternoon. Flynn said he does not plan to lay off any state troopers and still plans to move forward on filling 27 trooper vacancies.

Flynn is scheduled Tuesday to outline to the police chiefs and sheriffs his plan to consolidate dispatching.

Shumlin unveiled the concept in his inauguration speech in January, but offered no details.

Rutland would lose 19 permanent jobs and Derby would lose 17, Flynn has said. He noted the net loss is 14 because of the various new hires required at the two remaining centers to cover the increased workloads.

The move by the firefighters and emergency medical personnel comes as the head of the Vermont Troopers' Association told the Burlington Free Press that his 275-member union plans to remain silent on the issue.

O'Brien said response times "are paramount" and his association "would hate to see anyone get hurt or killed because of cuts to public safety."

"The longer it takes for responders to get out the door, the longer a fire goes unsuppressed or a medical conditions goes untreated," he said.

O'Brien noted the calls to the dispatch centers "are increasing 3 percent per year (and) we feel that no jobs should be eliminated. The loss of experience at Rutland and Derby will be a huge blow to the Vermont 911 system."

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