

State of Vermont - Department of Public Safety
Transition to Statewide Regional Emergency Communications
Working Draft - Updated 01-26-22

Introduction & Background

Today there are four ways emergency responders (emergency medical services, fire service, and law enforcement/police) in Vermont receive call taking and dispatching services in three primary ways:

- Dispatching their own calls for service, sometimes sharing service with agencies in adjacent areas.
- Receiving services from one of four regional communications centers located in Hartford, Lamoille County, Shelburne, and St. Albans. Note: each of these centers is also a Public Safety Answering Point (PSAP), designated to handle 911 calls in a “catchment” area.
- Receiving services from one of two Department of Public Safety / VT State Police (VSP) communication centers (also PSAPs) located in Williston and Westminster.
- Contracting for services out of state.

Since 1969, numerous studies and reports have been completed regarding the most efficient and stable way to deliver statewide public safety communications (call taking and emergency service dispatching). These studies have consistently recommended a statewide system of shared services through regionalization, especially for emergency communications.

In 2022, technologies exist to facilitate a further transition to regional communications. Radio systems can be remotely operated. Computer aided dispatch systems are now cloud based and can be operated from any location with a secure Internet connection.

Problem Statement: Systemic instability in the current system

The existing network of systems relies too heavily on the two VSP centers. This over-reliance has created a system that is precarious and out of balance. These two centers provide too large a proportion of service. This, coupled with the complexity of those operations and staffing challenges that flow directly from that complexity, make the State’s largest service provider vulnerable to service interruptions and potential failure as staffing challenges remain unabated.

- VSP centers account for 16 of 24 statewide 911 “positions” - 9 positions are in Williston -7 positions are in Westminster
- Those positions historically account for 68-70% of total statewide 911 call volume
- Statewide 911 call volume increases annually (up approximately 4.3% in the most recent full year over year).
- Historic efforts to consolidate state run centers that resulted in reductions in workforce of 14 positions (2 have since been restored) continue to result in high workloads for staff.
- VSP centers dispatch for over 100 emergency service agencies (see attached addendum for a full list). This causes immense complexity in operations, including extensive training required to be proficient in handling so many varied agencies and operations. As a point of comparison – The Lamoille regional center reports that 5 law enforcement agencies create a sizable workload in their center and with 16-17 total agencies dispatched, that is close to the optimal size.
- Attrition (staff turnover) at the VSP centers is, according to the Department of Human Resources, the highest in state government. There are a variety of factors, however, exit interviews universally indicate that the volume and complexity of work is the most critical factor in attrition.

- At full staff, which arguably is not enough to handle the call volume and complexity, there would be 64 dispatchers.
 - Williston and Westminster each have multiple unfilled positions and staff attrition continues on an ongoing basis. Overall staff availability in the two state run communication centers reflects a 36% vacancy rate.
- Departing dispatchers are applying for other, less stressful, state jobs; jobs at other communication centers; and other careers.

In late summer 2021, as a result of increasing staffing challenges, the two VSP centers began “shedding” 911 call to other PSAPs as their ability to answer the number of calls designated in their “catchment” area fell precipitously from approximately 90% to approximately 70% in Williston and 80% in Westminster. As a result, the 911 Board reassigned staff to assist in taking calls in the VSP catchment area to alleviate additional burdens that were cascading to other regional centers. DPS then hired temporary 911 call takers to assist with workloads in the VSP centers and attempt to alleviate the cascading impacts to the 911 team and other PSAPs.

Staffing projections for both near and long term are not encouraging. Current levels and attrition rates are anticipated to continue at unsustainable levels as the driving factor is complexity of operations. Confidence in the ability to maintain stability in operations at the two state run communications centers is wavering. The result is the recommendation to move to the long-envisioned system of more stable and diffuse regional communications by expanding our existing system of four (4) regional communications center to a statewide system of approximately nine (9) centers.

Note: We have begun (mid-January 2022) a process to create retention bonuses to help alleviate the deterioration in the near term. This strategy is in addition to the temporary 911 call takers that have been added to absorb call volume with reduced staffing.

Long term solution – Regional communications expansion

The most viable solution, after 52+ years of studies and reports, to stabilize our emergency communications operating environment for the long term is to build out the long-envisioned system of regional communication centers. This approach will diffuse the work of emergency communications to a wider array of Vermont communities and open the work to different cross sections of our workforce. It will solve the core problem of attrition and instability by reducing the complexity and volume of work in the two state-run communication centers.

For the first time in five decades, there is proposed investment to make this transition. An initial investment of \$11M is in the recommended budget for FY23. That money is in two tranches – one \$8M one-time and one \$3M base (envisioned to sunset in 24 to 36 months when the projects are completed). This investment will take the form of grants to:

1. Create new regional communication centers. Grants will go to county and municipal entities and/or inter-municipal collaborations that are created to serve multiple communities and multiple agencies in a region of the state. Based on discussions over the past 6+ months, new regional centers are envisioned in:
 - Chittenden County
 - Newport / Essex County / Northeast Kingdom
 - Rutland County

- Washington County
 - Windsor County
2. Fund our four existing regional centers for costs directly associated with taking on new agencies in their regions. Existing regional centers exist in:
 - Hartford
 - Lamoille County
 - Shelburne
 - St. Albans
 3. Fund the initial year of transition and operational costs for agencies transitioning from state services to regionalized services.
 4. Additionally, the Department of Public Safety Radio Technology Group will assist to the greatest extent possible with technical consultation and sharing state-owned communications infrastructure.

Operationalizing this transition will occur at varying speeds in different regions. For example, efforts in Chittenden County, Essex County, and Washington County are in a more advanced phase of development. We anticipate that transitions will occur as soon as 6 to 12 months for some while others may take 24-36 months. Time is of the essence as the underlying goal is to stabilize operations in a critical area of service to Vermonters.

Of note, because time is of the essence, beginning in late January a multi-agency, multi-disciplinary team of stakeholders has been impaneled to begin framing the grant program, criteria, etc.

Also of note, the Department of Public Safety – Emergency Management Homeland Security Unit has prioritized investment in these regional communications efforts in the FY23 grant program. This will further bolster the investments needed to make this transition successful.