

Good afternoon,

My name is Steven Locke and I currently serve as the fire chief for the city of South Burlington. I've been involved in the fire service for the past 35 years and for 31 of those, it has been my profession. For the last 15 years I've served as a fire chief in the communities of Hartford Burlington in South Burlington. I also represent the fire service on the E911 Board and serve as the chair of the Chittenden County Public Safety Authority (CCPSA). While I have never been a dispatcher, I have had the opportunity to sit in many communications centers and have a solid understanding of their operations. It is certainly one of the most difficult, undervalued professions.

In 2016 when I went to work for the City of Burlington, Mayor Weinberger asked me to take one more look with our regional partners on the feasibility of creating a regional dispatch center. The concept had been talked about in the County for over 50 years. Working with my colleagues and city managers in the neighboring communities, we developed a governance model and went to the voters on Town Meeting Day in 2018 to create the CCPSA. The creation of the regional authority was overwhelmingly supported by the voters in six communities. Since that vote our efforts have been focused on making this long discussed project a reality. I tell you this story because creating a regional dispatch center is not easy nor inexpensive.

I have watched this conversation on regional dispatch play out throughout the last two legislative sessions. Unfortunately, I think there has been a loss of focus on the initial problem former Public Safety Commissioner Schirling brought forth last year. While we certainly have radio and cell phone coverage concerns as well as interoperability and redundancy issues that need to be resolved, I fear we are

moving away from the real problem and that progress on creating regional dispatch centers will simply fail.

Currently there are several well-functioning regional dispatch centers in operation throughout the State. I grew up in Lamoille County where my father was a fire chief from the mid-70's through 2008, and the Sherriff's Department there has had a regional center for as long as I can remember. When I moved to the Upper Valley over 30 years ago, regional emergency communications were in place and that has only expanded today. We should support those centers with increased technology, but otherwise leave them alone; they know how to get it done.

In my opinion, we need to focus back on the original problem which is that the Department of Public Safety should not be in the business of dispatching except for State Police, and that the focus should be on creating regional communications centers in those areas that are underserved.

While the Chittenden County Public Safety Authority (CCPSA) has been working for years to set up a new center, we have found it challenging due to the expense. The CCPSA has collected approximately 2 million in funds from member contributions, grants, and congressionally directed spending. However, we are still 1.5 million short of making this come together. The CCPSA was almost there last fall. We had interviewed candidates for an executive director, were in the process of contract negotiations with our preferred candidate and had an expectation of beginning service delivery in the fall of 2023. However, budget pressures in one of our member communities forced them to withdraw, which caused the financials of the entire project to no longer work.

I would offer that the CCPSA could be the model regional dispatch center you are looking to create and if used as a pilot program in collaboration with a dispatch stakeholder group, could be the first of several new regional centers around the State. This center will use computer aided dispatch to move resources efficiently, ensure redundancy and interoperability, and meet the expectations of a modern communications center. There is a path forward to resolving this long discussed problem, but it is not with more study; it requires funding and it requires action.

I welcome any questions you may have.