

## Request for First Responder Designation for Vermont's Water & Wastewater Personnel

**The Vermont Rural Water Association and VT WARN (our state's water mutual aid network) urge the Vermont legislature to officially designate personnel at drinking water and wastewater facilities as First Responders.** Drinking water and wastewater treatment are critical to public health and safety.

- Water and wastewater utilities have been designated as critical infrastructure by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), but water and wastewater workers have received no such State or Federal recognition. We need a designation that is universally understood.
- In August 2023, FEMA added "Water Systems" to its list of Community Lifelines. Drinking water and wastewater will now receive extra focus from FEMA during an emergency.
- In 2022, New Hampshire passed SB325, formally recognizing public works employees as first responders. In Vermont, not all water and wastewater workers are public works employees.

A bill that grants First Responder Designation to water and wastewater personnel and public works employees would better enable these workers to respond to emergencies in Vermont.

### Why do water/wastewater personnel need to be designated as First Responders?

- **Access to towns experiencing emergencies:** when roads were closed after Tropical Storm Irene, some operators were not allowed by the authorities to access treatment facilities. The majority of water and wastewater operators in Vermont are not employed by towns, cities or villages.
- **Stay-at-home orders:** Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, people were asked to work from home except for essential workers, including water and wastewater operators. Later in the pandemic, the term "essential worker" lost its meaning when the Governor stated "everyone is essential." Operators can't work remotely and need to be allowed to work at their treatment facilities or out in their collection/distribution systems.
- **Weather-related travel restrictions:** during floods, ice storms, and high wind events, people are sometimes asked not to be on the roads. Water and wastewater operators still need to be able to get to treatment facilities and access their infrastructure throughout their service area.
- Some water/wastewater operators have been denied access to priority cell phone service through FirstNet, priority restoration of power during outages, access to generators, fuel, etc.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, water and wastewater workers were never included in Vermont's definition of frontline workers and were not given hazard pay or vaccine priority.

### Essential services provided by drinking water & wastewater personnel

- Treatment of drinking water that meets state regulations and federal Safe Drinking Water Act
- Treatment of sewage to meet state regulations and federal Clean Water Act requirements
- Water flow and pressure levels necessary for firefighting
- Water and sewer for critical infrastructure like schools, hospitals and nursing homes, as well as community businesses and local industry



**VT WARN**  
Water & Wastewater Mutual  
Aid Network

## What happens when drinking water or wastewater services are interrupted?

- A Boil Water Notice is issued when there is a chance of bacterial contamination to drinking water, such as when a pipe breaks.
  - Residents will need to boil water for 60 seconds before drinking or use bottled water
  - Schools will need to provide bottled water or close
  - Hospitals and nursing homes may need to evacuate patients
  - Restaurants and lodging establishment may need to close
- A Do Not Drink/Do Not Use Order is issued when there is a chance of contamination that can't be removed by boiling, such as contamination by fuel oil or pesticides after flooding.
  - Residents will need bottled water for drinking, cooking, and possibly showering/cleaning
  - Schools will need to provide bottled water or close
  - Hospitals and nursing homes may need to evacuate patients
  - Restaurants need to close, other local businesses may be impacted
- There may be no water at all after severe damage to a treatment facility or infrastructure like a water main or other distribution pipes and connections.
  - Residents will need bottled water for all uses
  - Schools will need to close
  - Hospitals and nursing homes may need to evacuate patients
  - Restaurants need to close, other local businesses may be impacted
  - Industries like energy production and manufacturing may need to halt production
  - There will be no water for firefighting
- There may be no wastewater treatment after severe damage to a treatment facility or infrastructure like a sewer main or other parts of the collection system.
  - Untreated sewage will be released to rivers and/or lakes
  - Waterbodies may be closed to recreation for an extended period due to high levels of bacteria or other contaminants
  - Manufacturers that send sewage to wastewater treatment facility may need to halt production
  - Possibility that sewers may back up into homes and businesses

## Types of Emergencies that Impact Drinking Water & Wastewater Services

- Natural disasters: storms, flooding, ice, etc.
- Terrorism/bioterrorism
- Pandemics
- Cyber attacks
- Fire
- Infrastructure damage: water/sewer main break, leaking pipe, broken pump station, broken hydrant, power outage, etc.

We ask the legislature to grant First Responder Designation to water and wastewater personnel to protect Vermont's public health and safety.