



City of Vergennes Fire Department
50 Green Street, Vergennes, Vermont, 05491

May 8, 2026

Members of the Vermont General Assembly

Vermont State House of Representatives & Senate

Montpelier, Vermont 05633

Dear Members of the Vermont Legislature,

I write to you today in two capacities: as Chief of the City of Vergennes Fire Department and as Vice President of the Vermont State Firefighters' Association. Together, these roles give me a clear view of Vermont's emergency response system at both the local and statewide level — and what I see in the coming months demands your immediate attention.

On May 7, 2026, the President's Council to Assess the Federal Emergency Management Agency released its *Final Report and Implementation Addendum* the most sweeping restructuring of federal disaster management since FEMA's creation in 1979. The report's central doctrine is unambiguous: disaster response shall be "locally executed, state or tribally managed, and federally supported." That is not an aspiration. It is a policy direction with a two-to-three-year implementation timeline. The financial and operational burden it shifts onto states is direct, immediate, and consequential for Vermont.

VERMONT'S RECENT HISTORY MAKES THIS PERSONAL

Vermont is not a theoretical case study. In July 2023, Vermont experienced one of the most catastrophic flooding events in its history with river levels in some locations exceeding those of Tropical Storm Irene. FEMA operational teams were deployed to Vermont and worked alongside our state and local responders. That federal presence was not a luxury. It was a necessary and relied-upon component of the response to an event that tested the limits of our state and local capacity. Those teams provided critical services to Vermonters during their worst days.

Then, in July 2024, Tropical Storm Beryl struck Vermont almost exactly one year later causing widespread damage to roads, bridges, farmland, and communities already recovering from the prior year. Back-to-back. Same state. Same infrastructure gaps. Vermont the 49th most populous state in the nation ranks **seventh nationally in federal disaster declarations**, with Washington County ranking **third in the nation** in total declarations between 2011 and 2023. This is not bad luck. It is a structural pattern.

The federal report now being implemented is telling us, in writing, that the support Vermont relied upon in 2023 will no longer be the default federal response. The responsibility for that capacity falls to us. The question before this Legislature is whether Vermont will be ready.

WHAT THE FEDERAL REPORT REQUIRES VERMONT

1. Federal On-The-Ground Response Will Be Sharply Limited

The report explicitly recommends restricting federal operational deployment “to only incidents that exceed the capabilities and capacities of SLTT stakeholders.” The events of 2023 and 2024 were significant but under the new framework, Vermont must demonstrate its own capacity before federal operational teams deploy. We cannot assume the cavalry arrives. We must *be* the cavalry.

2. The Vermont State USAR Team Is Being Left to the State to Fund

The Vermont State USAR Team a 90-member team of firefighters, EMTs, physicians, engineers, and K9 handlers is Vermont’s only statewide technical rescue asset. When it deploys, there is no backup. Its documented deployment time is approximately two hours plus travel, which means local teams are the true first-response tier and USAR is the critical second tier. Both must be funded.

In 2025, this Legislature formally recognized the USAR Team in statute under 20 V.S.A. §50 and appropriated **\$450,000 in recurring funding** a first and important step in a deliberate phased transition away from federal grant dependence but far short of the \$950k that was requested. The FY2027 request for an additional **\$270,000** which passed House Government Operations and was subsequently stripped by House Appropriations is the continuation of that Legislature’s own commitment. The identified full operational requirement for the Vermont USAR Team is **\$950,000 annually in 2025**. We are currently funded at less than half that figure. The federal report makes clear this is no longer optional planning: the federal government is explicitly transitioning USAR sustainment responsibility to the states.

3. Non-Disaster Grant Funding Is Structurally Changing

The report recommends that non-disaster grant programs including the Emergency Management Performance Grant (EMPG) and Homeland Security Grant Program (HSGP) shift to funding only new capabilities, with states absorbing ongoing personnel and maintenance costs “in perpetuity” from state funds after an initial federal investment. Much of the equipment currently underpinning Vermont’s technical rescue capability was originally purchased through HSGP funding. That pipeline is tightening. The FEMA report formalizes that trend as structural policy.

4. Local Swiftwater Teams Must Be Supported to Meet National Standards

The report specifically recommends refocusing grant investment on typed, credentialed “mission-ready teams” including State Swiftwater Rescue cataloged in a forthcoming National Resource Hub. Eligibility for future federal grant dollars and mutual aid deployment authorization will depend on meeting those standards.

Under the current Vermont framework, the State provides boats and trailers to the ten swiftwater rescue teams holding Memoranda of Agreement with Vermont Emergency Management. That is where state support ends. Teams without MOAs receive nothing. All personal protective equipment, specialized gear, and training are self-funded by local departments. A complete swiftwater rescue gear set exceeds **\$3,200 per person** before training costs. For most volunteer and combination departments, technical rescue is a secondary or tertiary mission. This equipment competes with fire gear, EMS supplies, and apparatus maintenance for the same limited local dollars.

The affiliated team support program proposed under H.935 **\$25,000 annually** distributed through the USAR Team to MOA-holding agencies directly addressed this gap at minimal cost. Its removal from the budget leaves local teams unable to meet the very national standards the federal government will use to determine future eligibility.

5. EMAC Participation Is Now a Competitive Criterion for Federal Cost-Share

Under the new RAPID Direct Funding model proposed in the report, a state's EMAC participation history is among the criteria determining its federal cost-share percentage following a disaster declaration. Vermont's track record including USAR deployments to Hurricane Helene and the mutual aid received during 2023 and 2024 are a genuine asset in that framework. It is only maintained if we invest in the teams that sustain it.

OUR REQUEST

We respectfully ask this Legislature to take the following actions:

- **Restore the \$270,000 in baseline funding at least if not more in additional recurring USAR funding** removed by House Appropriations in FY2027, consistent with the phased funding plan this Legislature established in 2025. This is not a new ask it is this body's own commitment carried forward.
- **Restore the \$25,000 Affiliated Team Support Program under 20 V.S.A. §53**, providing direct support to MOA-holding local technical rescue agencies. At \$25,000 annually, this is among the highest-return investments the Legislature can make in Vermont's life-safety infrastructure.
- **Sustain EMPG and HSGP state match commitments** and begin planning now for the state fiscal responsibility that will replace federal grant support as the FEMA restructuring takes effect over the next two to three years.
- **Recognize that Vermont's budget decisions today are Vermont's response capability in the next flood.** The 2023 and 2024 events are not anomalies. They are the pattern. The federal government has now documented, in a formal presidential council report, that it is stepping back from the operational role it played during those events. Vermont must step forward.

The firefighters, EMTs, and technical rescue professionals of Vermont show up when Vermonters need them most. They showed up in 2023. They showed up in 2024. They will show up again. What they need from this Legislature is the resources to be ready when that call comes without relying on a federal system that, by its own published policy, will no longer be there in the same way.

I am available at your convenience to discuss any aspect of this letter and would welcome the opportunity to speak directly with any member of the committee considering these matters.

Respectfully submitted,

David DiBiase

Chief, City of Vergennes Fire Department

Vice President, Vermont State Firefighters' Association

802-989-1845

vfdchief@vergennes.org