

Dear Mr. Chair and distinguished leaders of the Senate.

Good afternoon.

My name is Aaron Collette; I am humbled that you have invited me back to join you. As a brief reminder, I serve as the Fire Chief for the Williston Fire Department, in addition to this role, I am the Rescue Team Manager for the Vermont Urban Search and Rescue Task Force, where I have served for the past 11 years. Prior to these roles, I served the City of Burlington Fire Department for twenty-five years, retiring in 2020 as the Deputy Chief of Operations, where I was responsible for overseeing emergency response, crisis mitigation, and firefighter training across the city.

Today, I am speaking in support of Technical Rescue Microgrant program, the Weather Alert Systems for municipal corporations, and continued investment in the State Urban Search and Rescue program.

Last week, when I was invited to testify to your committee, I spoke at length about risk management and wildland fire prevention. I would encourage you to again focus on risk management. I was only recently made aware that the language supporting the evolution of a wildland fire response task force was removed from the language of the bill. I would strongly urge you to revisit this language, as we continue to see the number of volunteer and paid-on call firefighters dwindling in the state. We need to start this conversation now to better prepare our state to mitigate our wildland fire risk. The wildland fire task force and its corresponding study, will use data to help drive decisions in the future, for the betterment of our state.

Expanding on the concept of risk, I would like to shift to another critical area of specialized response capability: technical rescue. Currently, technical rescue training in Vermont is largely limited to the awareness level. This awareness level training is designed to prevent death or injury to would be rescuers. This training is not focused on operations and mitigation of technical rescues. Agencies seeking more advanced training often must rely on grants or third-party vendors to develop these highly specialized skills. These capabilities are essential and are already saving lives across the state. At the same time, we should continue emphasizing prevention and risk mitigation to reduce the likelihood of placing our citizens in harm's way.

A recent example underscores the importance of proactive investments. On July 4, 2025, catastrophic flooding along the Guadalupe River in Kerr County, Texas, claimed the lives of 27 campers and counselors at Camp Mystic. In total, that disaster resulted in 138 fatalities and an estimated \$18 billion in losses. While investigations are ongoing, one lesson is already clear: prevention and early warning systems matter. In 2017, Kerr County sought FEMA funding for a flood warning system, which was denied. The concept was revisited in 2021 but ultimately not

pursued. The consequences of those missed opportunities are devastating. We cannot afford to take a similar approach to risk in Vermont.

As policymakers and emergency responders, we share responsibility for advancing prevention, education, and situational awareness. I encourage you to support the collaborative framework outlined in Section 6 of this bill to strengthen and expand all-hazards weather alerting systems for our communities.

The Technical Rescue microgrant program is a small ask, to support local, initial responders to high risk, low frequency events. We must remember that many of our emergency responses lack discretionary time, and our emergency responders must jump into action with very little time to await outside assistance. Technical rescue incidents require three critical components. They require the right people, with the right training, armed with the right equipment. A canoe and a life jacket do not qualify as the right equipment. This microgrant program, when properly managed by the Program Manager of the Vermont Urban Search and Rescue Team, can work to build operational capacity in geographically strategic locations across Vermont. As I heard mentioned here last week, no one has any interest in stockpiling the same technical rescue assets in neighboring communities in Vermont. We must look at operational vulnerabilities and work to place lifesaving equipment strategically across the state in areas that have been identified as predisposed to technical rescue emergencies.

I would urge you to continue to look at supporting the State's Urban Search and Rescue Task Force. Where over the past three years, over two hundred and fifty Vermonters have been rescued during flooding events. This team cannot continue to evolve without dedicated and reliable funding.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A. J. Collette', written in a cursive style.

Aaron J. Collette, EFO, CFO, IAAI-FIT

Chief of Department

Williston Fire Department