

Written Testimony Senate Committee on Government Operations

H.935 Vermont Public Safety Funding

Regarding Sections Removed by House Appropriations

Chair Collamore and Members of the Senate Committee on Government Operations,

I respectfully submit this testimony in support of restoring two provisions included in H.935 as passed by the House Committee on Government Operations but subsequently removed by the House Committee on Appropriations: additional recurring funding for the Vermont State Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) Team, and the USAR Affiliated Team Support Program providing \$25,000 annually to local rescue agencies. Both provisions are essential to protecting the safety of Vermonters and the record of this team's work makes the case plainly.

What This Team Has Done for Vermonters

The Vermont State USAR Team VT-TF1 is a 90-member team of firefighters, EMTs, doctors, engineers, and K9 handlers operating under the Department of Public Safety, Division of Fire Safety, activated through Vermont Emergency Management. It is the only statewide technical rescue assets available to municipalities when local resources are overwhelmed. VT-TF1 primary mission is to serve the state of Vermont at a high technical level as requested by the state or local government. Additionally, VT-TF1 provides support to other states during disasters, this has allowed them to grow relationships with other states that in return respond when we have a need larger than our capacity. This was true in both 2023 and 2024 flooding events.

The numbers speak for themselves:

- 267 Vermonters were rescued during flood events over the last two years alone.
- 22 incidents responded to in 2024, 21 of them in Vermont including flood responses, building collapses, structural stabilization at fatal fire scenes, and direct assistance to state agencies.
- Deployed to Hurricane Helene, representing Vermont in Florida and South Carolina.
- Coordinates with the National Weather Service and VEM to maintain 24/7 readiness statewide.
- Requests and coordinates out-of-state resources to Vermont when incidents exceed state capacity.

Vermont has experienced a significant increase in large-scale flooding events over recent years, and that trend is not reversing. These storms are becoming more powerful and more frequent. The demand on this team will only grow. The Legislature has spent considerable time discussing flood response it is difficult to reconcile that attention with continued failure to provide stable funding for the team that does the actual rescuing.

A Program That Has Never Been Fully Funded

This is not the first time this funding request has been cut at the Appropriations stage. The history is worth stating plainly:

- In the prior session, a request for \$750,000 in annual recurring funding passed through most of the legislative process before Appropriations removed it at the last minute and replaced it with one-time funding of \$250,000.
- The full operational requirement for this team, as presented to the Legislature, is \$950,000 annually. That figure reflects what is genuinely needed to sustain this capability including facility costs, as a capital bill request for a new facility was approved for planning but has since been dropped, leaving leasing as the only viable path.
- In FY2026, the Legislature appropriated \$450,000 in recurring funding less than half the identified need. Vermont's fire service welcomed that appropriation while understanding it fell significantly short of what the program actually requires to operate.
- The FY2027 request for an additional \$270,000 brings the total to \$720,000 still \$230,000 below what was identified as the full operational requirement.

What House Appropriations has done compounds an already underfunded situation. The program has never received what it actually needs. Cutting even the incremental progress made in FY2026 pushes this team further from operational stability, not closer to it. Every time this funding is cut, the team is forced back to the same unsustainable patchwork that has constrained it from the beginning.

The Funding Patchwork Is Unsustainable

Since its inception, this team has never had stable dedicated funding. It is operated by borrowing from other programs:

- Operational costs have been offset through Hazardous Materials Response program funding, drawing resources away from that program's own equipment and readiness needs. The Division of Fire Safety is now feeling that pressure directly.
- The team's sole full-time employee is funded through the Homeland Security Grant Program meaning that person must write a grant application every year simply to keep their own position. That is not a sustainable employment model for a critical statewide capability.
- Federal HSGP funding has been reduced over each of the last two years. Given the current federal environment, further reductions are expected. Continued reliance on these dollars for core operations is not a plan it is a gamble.
- Every dollar of HSGP directed to USAR operations is a dollar not available to Vermont's municipal emergency responders, who depend on those funds for their own terrorism and all-hazard preparedness programs.

There also remains a persistent misunderstanding that USAR is a federally funded program that does not require State investment. It is not. Federal grants were never designed to sustain ongoing State operations, and federal guidance explicitly discourages this practice. The State built this capability it must fund it.

Facility Conditions Threaten Mission Readiness

The team currently operates from a former facility in Colchester that is shared with the Hazmat team and storage for other assets. The conditions directly threaten the readiness of mission-critical equipment:

- No fire protection systems in the building
- No classrooms or dedicated training areas
- Equipment must be placed with extreme precision to avoid damaging some assets stored outside due to insufficient space
- No sleeping accommodations, which limits the team's ability to stage for extended operations
- Inadequate restroom facilities

Loss or damage to technical rescue equipment stored in these conditions would have immediate consequences for the State's ability to deploy. This is not a hypothetical it is a foreseeable operational risk that recurring State funding would address.

A Practical Path Forward: One Appropriation, Two Problems Solved

Rather than requiring two separate appropriations, there is a straightforward solution: appropriate the full \$270,000 increase to the Vermont USAR Team in recurring funding, with \$25,000 of that amount earmarked for distribution to affiliated rescue agencies holding Memoranda of Agreement with the Vermont Division of Emergency Management, consistent with the framework proposed under 20 V.S.A. §53.

This approach:

- Moves the program meaningfully closer to the \$950,000 operational requirement the Legislature has been presented with but has not yet been fully funded
- Eliminates the need for separate affiliated team support appropriation
- Directs local capacity funding through the entity USAR best positioned to assess affiliated team needs and ensure alignment with statewide priorities
- Keeps the administrative structure clean and accountable under a single program

Why Local Support Still Matters

USAR is not a local rapid response tool. With a deployment time of approximately two hours plus travel, it cannot meet the immediate need that local technical rescue teams serve. Those teams arrive within minutes. They are the first faces Vermonters in crisis will see.

Yet those local teams many of which hold MOAs with the State must self-fund all personal protective equipment, training, and specialized gear. A complete swift water rescue gear set exceeds \$3,200 per person before training costs. For departments where technical rescue is a secondary mission and fundraisers fund basic operations, that investment is simply out of reach. The \$25,000 earmark within the USAR appropriation addresses this gap without requiring a separate program or separate administrative overhead.

Conclusion

Vermont funds a great many programs, many of them important, many of them at cost that dwarf what is being asked here. But very few of those programs have pulled 267 people out of floodwater. Very few of them deploy when the roads wash out, when the building collapses, when the river takes everything. This team does.

The members of VT-TF1 are not full-time State employees. They are your neighbors' firefighters, doctors, engineers who leave their families, sometimes for weeks, the moment Vermont calls. They have done that repeatedly, under increasingly dangerous conditions, with aging equipment, from a facility with no fire suppression system, funded by grants that may not exist next year.

At some point the question stops being about the budget and starts being about what we owe the people who show up when Vermonters need help the most. This team has shown up. The State has not fully shown up for them.

I respectfully urge the Committee to restore these provisions. The cost is modest. The need is real. And the people this team serves have no other option when the water is rising.

Respectfully submitted,

David DiBiase

Fire Chief, City of Vergennes Fire Department

Vice President, Vermont State Firefighters' Association