

Representative Lisa Hango, Franklin-5

House Government Operations & Military Affairs wrote this committee bill in response to lessons learned during recent floods, wildfires, and other all-hazards events.

I'll go through the sections of the bill, but please keep in mind that several appropriations have been amended by both the House and Senate Appropriations Committees on its journey, and you'll be hearing from JFO on those changes later today.

Sec 1 establishes the Ready Response Grant Program. The Division of Emergency Management, within the Department of Public Safety, will award grants to qualifying nonprofits to source, store, distribute, and rotate shelf-stable, ready-to-eat foods and bottled water per a written MOU with the Division. The House ask was \$1M, which was amended to \$500,000 by House Approps, and was reduced to no funding by Senate Approps.

Sec 2 establishes the Technical Rescue Grant Program, as funds allow, not more than (5) grants for up to \$5,000 each will be awarded to VT fire departments, EMS agencies, and technical rescue agencies to be used for the purchase of specialized equipment, personal protective gear, and/or training. We heard that several of these small departments and agencies often have to choose between purchasing their own personal protective gear and the gear that is necessary to carry out a rescue. A (5) member Working Group would be created to review and recommend awards, provided this grant program is funded. Applicants shall demonstrate use, planned use, or need for technical rescue operations in their service area.

This section was also not funded, with DPS having been directed by House Approps to work within their budget to administer this program. I believe this Committee may have heard from them that they would prefer to restructure the program within the context of their existing programs.

Sec 3 is deleted. This was potential language from H697, which sought to establish a first responders' buffer zone during ongoing public safety emergencies.

Sec 4 & 5 add a disability-led organization appointed by the VT Council of Independent Living in an advisory capacity to local and regional emergency management organizations. These committees, divisions, and agencies have jurisdiction over emergency planning, to include how to write plans, develop training materials, and conduct exercises, keeping individuals who live with disabilities in mind.

This section also adds an "individual with lived experience" as an additional voting member of regional emergency management committees, which are currently composed of one

member from each municipality in that region. This language came from a bigger bill H.901 on disability rights.

Sec 6 Requires all-hazard or weather alert systems used by a municipal corporations if feasible to include communication channels to be accessible by individuals with disabilities. This bill tasked the VT Language Justice Project with, and appropriated \$70,000 for, implementation. House Appropriations removed this funding and indicated that the Office of Racial Equity within the Agency of Administration could absorb this responsibility in their office.

Sec 7-11 Fire Statutes (as reported by Rep Hooper)

Sec 12 Public Safety Communications

This section is the most complicated piece of this bill. It authorizes the ongoing expenditure of previously appropriated funds for Public Safety Communications. It does not call for appropriating any new funds.

Act 185 of 2022 appropriated funds to the Department of Public Safety for regional public communications (call-taking and dispatch). Act 78 of 2023 amended Act 185 to say that a portion of those funds were held in reserve until requested and approved for release, contingent on certain benchmarks being met, including assessing inventory and developing a public safety communications plan going forward. Act 185 required that the Public Safety Communications Task Force submit a request to the General Assembly for the release of the remaining funds held in reserve to implement the proposed plan.

The Public Safety Communications Task Force reported to the House Government Operations & Military Affairs Committee in January of 2026, and those reports can be found on our Committee webpage under Reports & Resources. The comprehensive technical plan for ongoing system improvements can also be found on the committee webpage.

This bill authorizes funds to be incrementally released over the next three years for the following: to complete projects that will establish a multidisciplinary computer-aided dispatch system and to secure five years of associated software licensing fees; to immediately make funds available for the expanded use of Rapid SOS technology and geographic information systems; and to implement and expand the Land Mobile Radio network to include a Statewide conceptual design, detailed designs for one or more proof of concept project(s), initial implementation of pilot project(s), and to build out 10 or more sites, including equipment and antenna deployment at existing chosen sites.

The Public Safety Communications Task Force will continue to exist until February 15, 2027 to advise the Department of Public Safety on the implementation of this plan.

The Department of Public Safety shall submit written reports to the House Committees on Appropriations and on Government Operations & Military Affairs and the Senate Committees on Appropriations and on Government Operations concerning the expenditure of monies on or before May 1, 2027, January 15, 2028, and January 15, 2029.

At the end of that three year period, the Department of Public Safety may submit a request to the General Assembly to authorize the use of any remaining monies appropriated or held in reserve.

House Government Operations & Military Affairs Committee recognizes that this has been a monumental undertaking over the past several years. The Task Force has been diligent with returning reports and completing tasks on time, according to benchmarks requested by House Appropriations over the years. This section allows DPS to continue the work, in coordination with other infrastructure improvements occurring simultaneously, that will make Vermont public safety communications more reliable, interoperable, resilient, and multidisciplinary.

Please remember that those monies were previously appropriated.

Sec 13 New Appropriations:

In this section, the following appropriations were made:

\$70,163 to AoA to create State emergency and all-hazards response and preparedness materials in 15 languages, including ASL and English, through the VT Language Justice Project **(REMOVED by House Approps – available through AoA, Office of Racial Equity)**

\$720,000 to DPS for supporting Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) **(Base funding only REMAINS \$580,000)**

\$25,000 to DPS for awarding grants from the Technical Rescue Grant Program **(REMOVED by House Approps – potentially available through DPS)**

\$450,000 to SoS to support Vermont Access Network (VAN) current operations and programming, to include \$90,000 for Community Radio, which we heard in testimony was essential during flooding situations when power was out **(UNCHANGED by House and Senate Approps)**

\$1,000,000 to DPS for Ready Response Grant Program administered by Division of Emergency Management (DEM, formerly VEM) **(AMENDED by House Approps to \$500,000 and REMOVED by Senate Approps)**

Sec 14 Effective date is July 1, 2026