The entities and individuals that comprise the public safety community in Vermont are numerous and diverse. Public safety providers generally encompass an array of organizations, ranging from the Department of Public Safety to the local constable, from the Vermont State Police to the local municipal police department. Some larger communities have the means to establish and maintain a municipal fire department, first responder and dispatch services, and a police department. Smaller communities often rely on volunteer fire departments and first responders, and contract out for policing services. While some parts of the state have very consistent police coverage, other more rural areas are chronically underserved. Such is the landscape of public safety in Vermont.

Law enforcement options at the local level include policing contracts with external agencies such as the state police or county sheriffs; municipal constables certified in law enforcement; special investigative units to investigate sex crimes, child abuse, domestic violence, crimes against people with disabilities, and other vulnerable populations; creating a police department; contracting for dispatch services; entering into an inter-municipal police services agreement with another municipality; or some combination thereof. Fifty-seven municipalities have police departments, and several of those provide services to neighboring towns. Around 135 municipalities have or share services with a fire department; 61 municipalities provide or share volunteer or professional ambulance services.

As the issues get more complex and as our service providers are tasked to deliver more assistance with fewer resources, it takes a coordinated effort from the all sectors of government to keep our citizens and communities safe.

**Twenty-First Century Policing.** The Vermont League of Cities and Towns supports the recommendations of the President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing ([http://ric-zai-inc.com/Publications/cops-p341-pub.pdf](http://ric-zai-inc.com/Publications/cops-p341-pub.pdf)), which is a national effort to help law enforcement agencies and communities strengthen trust and collaboration, pushing them into the next phase of community-focused policing. The report focuses on six broad recommendations:

- Law enforcement agencies can gain trust and legitimacy by establishing a positive presence at community activities and events, participating in proactive problem solving, and ensuring that communities have a seat at the table when working with officers.
- New and emerging technology is changing the way we police. It improves efficiency and transparency but also raises privacy concerns and is expensive. Body-worn cameras, less than lethal use of force...
technologies, communication, and social media all require a legal and pragmatic review of policies, practices, and procedures, which should be developed with input from the community and constitutional scholars.

The law enforcement community and government officials across the state need to be given the resources to help move this agenda forward. Many agencies and communities are currently doing so by implementing elements of the task forces’ recommendations, but more must be done to ensure that no community is left behind.

**Drugs, Corrections, and Mental Health.** Vermont is one of the safest states in the nation, however, we are not immune to the trends of drug abuse, violence, and crime that threaten the wellbeing of residents everywhere. Vermont is a small state of modest means; thus, we must work that much harder to respond to the ever-changing and increasingly challenging landscape of public safety. From responding to health emergencies and structure fires to keeping our roads safe and combating crime, our public safety personnel and organizations work incredibly hard to solve day-to-day public problems and respond directly to the needs of Vermont citizens, all with inadequate resources.

Vermont faces an illegal opiate and prescription drug problem that affects every community and at every level. Drug trafficking and abuse drive petty crimes, drain our resources in mental health, first responder, and health care institutions, and put incredible strain on families and communities that work to address the fallout from drug addiction. The negative effects seem to know no boundaries.

According to Andy Pallito, former Commissioner of the Vermont Department of Corrections (DOC), between 70 and 80 percent of our incarcerated population have addiction issues. And according to DOC’s [2015 Annual Report](#), more than 40 percent of them receive mental health services. Interactions between people with unresolved addiction or mental health issues and public safety personnel can be very challenging. As persons under the supervision of the department are released into our communities, there needs to be greater coordination between the state and local communities to make sure both individuals and municipalities are equipped with the wherewithal to keep our communities safe and healthy.

All programs designed to combat Vermont’s drug culture should be implemented in a coordinated fashion between agencies and municipal governments, and state-sponsored initiatives to address addiction should be supported by scientific, evidence-based models. Drug enforcement must have a robust local component because state police cannot be everywhere at all times. Distribution of funding must support municipal enforcement, infrastructure, and local services.

DOC must inform local officials – particularly police chiefs, managers and the local legislative body – of the circumstances of any offender’s release to the community and any potential risk that release may create. It is vital for the Agency of Human Services to determine the specific need for beds for individuals with both long-term and short-term mental health needs. Those with short-term needs should not be kept in hospital emergency rooms for lack of an appropriate placement. Public safety and municipal officials need to be part of the decision-making process regarding the location of temporary housing and municipal zoning should be respected in those decisions.

Local officials have stated that better coordination between DOC and law enforcement is needed to monitor the release of offenders and to avoid undue adverse burdens on any individual municipality. Offenders released to communities must receive reasonable DOC supervision and access to support services that ensures the safety of both them and the community. Municipalities need to be reimbursed
for the uninsured costs of providing emergency medical services for persons lodged in state-owned or -
funded facilities.

**Public Safety Training and Resources.** Vermonters value accessible fire protection, emergency
management, and first responders in health emergencies, but often take those services for granted. In
much of the state, volunteer squads provide many of these services. Finding volunteers whose jobs are
close to the fire house or emergency medical technician base and who have both the time and inclination
to participate in strenuous and ongoing training is becoming more and more difficult.

Police who provide law enforcement in the 21st century – with 21st century problems – depend on
training that is modern, effective, flexible, and comprehensive. Police departments want to recruit, hire,
and retain well trained and effective law enforcement officers, but Vermont is not immune to the
nationwide shortage of qualified candidates. It is not just a matter of hiring, retaining, and providing
ongoing training to these officers – it’s a matter of being able to get interested and viable recruits in the
door in the first place.

When energetic, dedicated, and smart citizens are willing and able to volunteer on local volunteer
squads, or if they show a serious interest in becoming a law enforcement officer in Vermont, it is
imperative that state and local governments do everything to provide the support and resources
necessary to ensure that they succeed.

Many years’ accumulation of unfunded training requirements for the public safety community has
significantly increased both the cost and the time commitment required to meet certification and training
requirements and need to be reassessed in light of changing priorities and The President’s Task Force on
21st Century Policing mentioned earlier. Current mandated training needs to be re-evaluated to
determine if they remain relevant; any outdated training mandates must be removed.

The legislature needs to provide comprehensive support for all law enforcement, fire safety, and
emergency services. Local emergency service agencies must be able to recover costs associated with
complying with federal, state, and court-ordered licensing, registration, or testing requirements.

The Vermont Fire Academy and the Criminal Justice Training Academy needs the support, funding, and
resources from the state to train personnel, and to ensure Vermont has a capable public safety workforce
and volunteer community. All users of the Criminal Justice Training Academy must be included in
discussions to reorganize the structure and funding for local first responders and emergency services
provider training. Partnering with all levels of government is necessary to provide a robust and skilled
delivery system, and future state legislation should focus on education and training, rather than
mandates and reprimand.

**VLCT supports:**

- Providing public safety officials the tools and funding to combat the growing drug culture and drug-
  related crime throughout the state;
- Any state-sponsored programs or initiatives intended to address quality of life crimes associated
  with opiate addiction by evidence-based scientific models;
- Prohibiting cost shifts and mandates to municipalities in public safety, unless the state provides full
reimbursement;

- Providing incentives and seed funding for regional public safety services programs that are run locally;
- Requiring the state to provide the best training programs, at an affordable rate, for all levels of public safety personnel, including police, constables, fire, search and rescue, and emergency medical services; and
- Restoring adequate funding for the Community Drug Interdiction Program and the state drug task force (http://vsp.vermont.gov/criminal/niu (3)).

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Resource Category:

- Legislative Policy Paper

Links
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