A Statewide Recommitment to Public Safety

They are the people who respond to emergencies at all hours of the day, every day of the year. They roll out of bed at 3 a.m. and jump into action when they hear the calls for help. They respond to traffic accidents, structure fires, and medical and mental health emergencies. They respond to domestic violence incidents, drug overdoses, property crimes, and bomb threats. They transport patients to hospitals, and respond to shootings, assaults, and incidents of animal abuse. They direct traffic, search for missing persons, conduct backcountry search and rescue, and welfare checks. The list goes on and on, and each year, we ask more and more from them, our first responders. We expect them to protect the dignity, health, and rights of all and to keep our communities safe from crime and violence in an ever-changing and increasingly challenging landscape. To say we ask a lot of our first responders is an understatement.

First responders – our fire fighters, police and emergency medical personnel – put their own lives on hold, and often in jeopardy, when they try to help others in distress. Ensuring the health and safety of Vermonters is the responsibility of both state and local governments, and it is everyone’s responsibility to provide them the essential support and resources they need to carry out their duties. That obligation, however, is becoming harder to achieve for many reasons, and there are no easy solutions. Vermonters need robust, ongoing conversations and partnerships between state and local governments and state agencies to tackle the pressing issues our first responders face.

Recruitment, Training, Retention. Vermont public safety departments, agencies, and service providers continue to experience difficulties recruiting, training, and retaining public safety personnel. It is the norm, not the exception, for police departments, rescue squads, and volunteer fire departments to be understaffed or to have more than one vacant position at any given time. Particularly at the local level, volunteer squads provide many public safety functions. Finding volunteers whose jobs are close to the firehouse or emergency medical technician base and who have the time and inclination to participate in costly and strenuous training is very difficult. These issues are no longer the purview of only volunteer squads; larger agencies with paid professional positions now regularly face them. It is not just a matter of hiring, retaining, and providing ongoing training – interested and viable recruits need to be found in the first place.

It is a difficult time to be a police officer given stringent training requirements, increased public scrutiny, and critical press often aimed at the profession. Finding recruits who will be a credit to the profession is challenging, especially since there are many other attractive career options. Many EMT’s and paramedics move on to other positions in healthcare, such as nursing and physicians’ assistants, or to careers in law enforcement or fire safety. This makes retaining rescue squad employees difficult. Training requirements in the public safety field increase every year and are more frequent, time consuming, and costly. Personnel and public safety departments struggle to keep up and often cannot afford to expand or even maintain adequate staffing levels. Budgets for municipalities are stressed from every direction as almost every town is wholly reliant on the property tax. Frequently, municipalities can’t match the compensation offered by the private sector or even by the State of Vermont, or by out-of-state opportunities for career advancement or a more affordable place to live.

Individual service providers cannot solve these problems alone, and a statewide recommitment to helping our fire, law enforcement, and emergency medical services providers is essential. State and municipal officials need to support broad-based recruiting efforts. They need to solicit current students, former military personnel, and the community at large for personnel. The Vermont Fire Academy, the Vermont Police Academy, and the Department of Health are all in need of increased funding for certification training programs and activities for all emergency service personnel. It is in everyone’s interest to determine
if current statutorily mandated training and its impact on personnel and agencies remain responsive to current circumstances and are necessary. We must explore alternatives to the residential Vermont Police Academy recruit training program, and provide more geographically diverse and affordable EMS training to fire and rescue squads. The Criminal Justice Training Council should provide tuition credits to municipal departments that send students to the Vermont Police Academy if those municipalities also contribute instructors or training assistants. Initiatives that address the statewide shortage of public safety personnel and create new ways to recruit and retain those individuals should be encouraged.

Marijuana. In January, Vermont’s Act 86 legalized recreational marijuana and removed civil and criminal penalties for the possession of small amounts of it, and allowed it to be cultivated and consumed at home. However, the legislation did not allow for a retail market as most other states that have legalized marijuana have done. In recent years, legislative efforts in Vermont to legalize a retail marijuana marketplace have failed, but that may soon change. The passage of Act 86 and the Governor’s Marijuana Advisory Commission – which will submit a report in December recommending how the state could operate a regulated and taxed retail market for marijuana – may both indicate the political will to create such a market here.

If the Vermont Legislature approves a taxed and regulated marijuana industry, there will be significant impacts on local governments and communities. Marijuana cultivation operations – whether located in an urban indoor facility or a farm field in a rural corner of the state – will still be in a municipality. So will retail shops. And that means the impacts of a retail market in Vermont will be wholly felt at the local level.

Any discussion of marijuana regulation must address the impacts on cities, towns, and villages, including those on school populations, municipal first responders, municipal regulations, and municipal budgets. Even since Act 86 was signed into law, local governments, public safety officials, and communities have been adversely affected. Thefts from residential home grow operations and hemp farms have been reported all across the state. Complaints from neighbors of these businesses who have negative reactions to marijuana odors have surged. Lively debates regarding the pros and cons of recreational marijuana use show how divisive the issue can be. A retail market will only increase dissent at the local level and strain resources earmarked for public safety. Local governments must be granted the authority to regulate marijuana – as they do with alcohol and liquor control – and which is the norm in virtually every other state that has a taxed and regulated market.

Schools need additional funds to educate students about the potential effects of marijuana consumption on them as well as the ramifications of the new law. Local voters must be granted the authority to determine if marijuana establishments will be permitted within their town or city. Then they need enough time to vote on the issue, and update or adopt applicable local ordinances, building codes, and zoning bylaws. The state needs to develop reliable roadside testing for drugged driving that can be applied equitably in every town, and provide funding for adequate public safety, code enforcement or zoning regulations or services to any community that lacks them.

Remember that states that have already legalized marijuana have more robust public safety presences in their towns and cities. Their municipal budgets are much larger than those in Vermont, and access to resources from their state governments is much greater. More importantly, in all states that have legalized a retail marijuana market, municipalities enjoy “home rule” authority to some degree, as well as local taxing authority and local revenue sharing. A municipality should receive some portion of revenues generated from marijuana taxation regardless of whether a marijuana establishment is located in it. In municipalities that host establishments, local governments should be granted automatic local taxing authority upon voter approval. Municipalities should not have to rely on already stressed budgets to respond to local impacts,
and greater economic benefits should accrue to communities that decide hosting such an establishment fits within their character.

**Dispatch and Regionalization.** 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, as well as 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-five municipalities have police departments, and several of them provide services to neighboring towns. One hundred and thirty-five municipalities have or share services with a fire department; 60 municipalities provide or share volunteer or professional ambulance services. The public safety landscape in Vermont is complex, scattered, inconsistent, confusing, and constantly changing. More needs to be done to make public safety more efficiently, effectively, and serve the needs of Vermont communities.

The state needs to fund municipalities that choose to explore the consolidation, integration, or regionalization of public safety services. Communities need reasonable support from the state to get these initiatives off the ground, and towns and cities that actively try to create more efficient and effective delivery of public safety services should be rewarded. For example, several Chittenden County municipalities have banded together to create a regional dispatch center under a union municipal district, but the endeavor requires support from the state. The cost-savings of efficient dispatch services benefits everyone, reducing long-term line items to the state budget and reliance on dispatching from the State Police. The legislature needs to collaborate with municipalities to create a systematic approach that financially supports both call handling and dispatch emergency services in Vermont. Currently, some local law enforcement, fire, and rescue agencies pay for their own emergency dispatch services, some have grandfathered arrangements with the Vermont State Police, and nearly 100 others do not pay any local fee for State Police dispatch services. These disparities have existed for decades and providing these dispatch services is expensive, severely straining state and local budgets across the state.

**Communications.** And although the benefits of providing statewide access to complete and affordable cellular and fiber optic service will certainly benefit residents, employees, and employers and businesses, the benefit it will provide public safety agencies and first responders to ensure better services to Vermonters cannot be understated. Reliable statewide communication between agencies, service providers, and civilians requires a dependable and affordable cellular and fiber optic network.
VLCT supports

1. Initiatives that address the statewide shortage of public safety personnel, and creating new ways to recruit and retain those individuals;
2. Providing funding to municipalities that choose to explore consolidating, integrating or regionalizing public safety services;
3. Creating a systemic approach that financially supports both call handling and dispatch emergency services;
4. Providing statewide access to complete and affordable cellular and fiber optics service that benefits public safety and first responders while improving the economy.

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