

Draft

11/16/00

Regional Dispatch Statement of Need

1) Introduction

The Concept of Regional Dispatching has been around for a number of years. In 1995 a Feasibility Study for Developing and Implementing a Regional Emergency Communications Center was completed. A follow-up report was completed in January, 1996. The study was funded from a grant procured through the efforts of Senator Leahy. The committee which worked on the study was known as the "Vision 2000" Committee. The study concluded that consolidation is feasible but required many steps involving multiple jurisdictions. Although the recommendations were never implemented the concept has not died.

In November, 1999 at a meeting of elected officials from Chittenden County, it was decided to form a group to examine whether the concept of a "Regional Dispatch" is worth resurrecting. The group, consisting primarily of Town Managers from some of the larger municipalities in the County met several times and reported back to the elected officials in June, 2000. Upon hearing the report, the elected officials concluded the concept of a regional dispatch is worth pursuing, and agreed with the report, that the costs and benefits must be clearly defined. They were however, somewhat skeptical of the Managers claim that regional dispatch will not save communities money, but agreed in any case there is a need to improve the level of service.

This statement of need reviews the current situation and reviews the reason why regional dispatch continues to be a concept worth pursuing.

2) Purpose of Public Safety Communications

The purpose of public safety communications is to receive information, determine the necessary public safety resources needed by the caller and then notify those resources. As noted in the feasibility study completed in 1995 and prepared for the Vision 2000 Communications Planning Group and the Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission, once a call has been placed to a public safety agency, the call needs to be prioritized. Information involving incidents which are, or may be emergencies, must be processed immediately. The staff, answering the calls for assistance, must know the correct response according to the policy and procedures. The staff also needs the tools that will allow them to alert, contact and communicate with the response units.

In short, the ideal communications system for public safety has minimal impediments to the flow of information, allowing inbound information to be received promptly and allowing outbound information to be distributed in an efficient and effective manner to all who need to know.

3) **Current Process**

The first step in the dispatching process is for a person in need of emergency police, fire or medical assistance to dial 911. These calls are answered by the State Police 911 call taker. The call taker identifies the nature of the emergency and the agency responsible for dispatching the appropriate emergency responder (police, fire, medical) based on the nature of the emergency and the physical location of the victim. The call taker then dials the emergency number for the appropriate dispatch agency. The call taker, depending on the situation, may or may not stay on the line until certain the call is being handled by the dispatch agency. The dispatch agency gathers pertinent information from the caller and then dispatches, either through direct radio communication or through pagers, the appropriate emergency responder.

In practice there are a many agencies providing dispatch services and even more providing response services. Below are several examples.

Example #1: A two car accident with injuries at Taft Corners Intersection in Williston was reported to the State Police 911 Center.

- The 911 Center Call Taker called the Vermont State Police Dispatch Center in Williston to dispatch a State Police Officer
- The Call Taker next called St. Michael's College who dispatched their ambulance and the Williston First Response Squad.
- St. Michael's College then called the Essex Police who dispatched the heavy rescue unit from Essex Junction and the Williston Fire Department
- St. Michael's College then called the Williston Police Department who dispatched the Williston Police

Total Involved: Four dispatch agencies and six response agencies

Example #2: During a snow storm last winter, a report of a car into a guardrail on Interstate 89 at mile marker 83 was received by the State Police 911 Center.

- The Vermont State Police Dispatch Center in Williston dispatches a State Police Officer
- The Essex Police Dispatches the heavy rescue unit from Essex Junction and the Williston Fire Department
- St. Michael's College dispatches their ambulance and the Williston First Response Squad.
- Twenty minutes into the call, with the emergency responders unable to locate the vehicle, the dispatcher communicates that a report has also been received for a car into the guardrail at mile marker 73. Additional dispatch agencies and emergency responders were then notified.
- UVM dispatches Richmond Fire Department

- Capital West dispatches Waterbury Heavy Rescue
- UVM dispatches Richmond Rescue

Total Involved: Five dispatch agencies and seven response agencies

4) **Observations:**

The present population in Chittenden County is about 142,000 as of 1998. This amounts to an increase of about seven percent (7%) since 1990. It also represents about twenty-five percent (25%) of the total population of Vermont, making it the most densely populated County in the State. As the density and size increase the demands on emergency services also increase.

Today, there are approximately 29 police, fire, first response and ambulance service agencies in Chittenden County. In addition, there are 11 agencies providing dispatch services for one or more of the response agencies. With this many agencies involved, it may be an understatement to describe it as a decentralized system.

The level of resources available varies from the high level available to large suburban community with state of the art equipment and readily available full time fire, police and rescue personnel. At the other end of the extreme may be a smaller, rural community with older equipment and limited day time volunteers. Mutual Aid provides some relief to this disparity when responding to major incidents but adds to the burden for dispatchers. The level of service provided by dispatch agencies also varies. In particular, the fire departments in the region have long complained about inadequate service provided to them during incidents. A complicating factor is differing dispatching and response protocols.

5) **Results**

With multiple dispatch agencies and response services involved, often responding to a single incident, communications between the various agencies and services is difficult. On occasion messages may be incomplete, inaccurate, or be dropped. Another result is that some incidents involve more response agencies than necessary. The reverse situation also occurs, with fewer response services, answering a call for service, than necessary. As the number of agencies involved in a call grows, there is an increased chance for human error. This also tends to increase the potential for delays and litigation. At the very least it may be a poor reflection on the services being provided.

In some communities, expectations for service far exceed reality. For example, do all residents of Williston understand that if they have a fire emergency, their call gets handled twice before the Fire Department is even dispatched? Once dispatched emergency personnel must drive from their place of business or home to the fire station and then to the fire location. Do they further understand that there may be insufficient personnel responding during the day and that additional personnel must drive to the scene from Essex as part of a mutual aid agreement?

In general, emergency response services throughout most of the County have inadequate field support. At the same time, particularly with the dispatching component, there is a major duplication of resources by municipalities, in both equipment and personnel. Since resources are limited, it is likely the quality of service is being affected.

Finally, communications and reporting protocols vary from community to community and between types of services. This represents another barrier between services and makes it difficult to gather comparative data useful for comparing the effectiveness and efficiency of each department.

A recent example illustrating some of the above problems is when a small airplane, crash landed in a field in South Burlington. Some response services were arriving at the scene while other response services had been to the site and were already on their way home. This represents a waste of resources, poor communications and it places many responders and citizens in jeopardy, needlessly.

6) **How to Improve the System**

There are a number of different ways in which the present system can be improved. What follows is a brief outline of several approaches which have been discussed over the past ten years. The discussion below is not intended to be a complete analysis of all the options, nor is it an in-depth analysis of the options reviewed here. The discussion is merely presented to highlight some of the issues under consideration.

One approach, which has been discussed at various points, is to develop sub-regional dispatch centers. To a certain degree, this approach is already beginning to evolve as evidenced by the services provided by Shelburne to surrounding communities. Essex and Colchester are also providing dispatch services to other communities. Automatic mutual aid has been used as a means of providing better day time coverage in some communities. Williston and Essex Junction fire departments, for example, automatically respond to calls in both communities during the day because of limited personnel. A variation establishing sub-regional dispatch centers is to establish two centers, with one specializing in

Police and one specializing in Fire/Rescue dispatching. The costs for this latter approach have been judged thus far, as being cost prohibitive.

Another approach is to establish one regional center to take advantage of the economies of scale. Given the huge number of agencies involved in providing dispatch and emergency services throughout the County, it seems unlikely that agreement could ever be reached to form a central, regionalized dispatch system. In addition, some communities have a major disincentive to join with a regional system because the state is subsidizing dispatch services by providing some communities with dispatch services at no cost to the community. A more prudent approach is to work towards that as a goal using an incremental approach. Only those communities most interested could form the dispatch center including the standard protocols and management structure. Other communities could then evaluate whether to join or not, as their needs change.

A related issue is whether the regional center should be a standalone facility or whether it should join with the State Police dispatching system. Joining with the State Police carries with it the concern that the State Police will not be as responsive to the service demands of the communities as desired. The advantage of this option is the potential savings in infrastructure costs. A standalone center might be more responsive but also may be more costly.

Finally, some standardization of communication and other related protocols can help and would not involve a significant expenditure of additional resources.

7) **Goal Statement:**

In view of the problems and issues outlined above, we believe the region should explore establishing a regional dispatch system on an incremental basis as a means of improving public safety communications. It is the goal of the Committee to work towards establishing such a center by January 1, 2002.

