

Vermont Fire Service Training Council
Minutes of the April 6, 2023 Meeting

The meeting was held at the Williston Fire Station and included a virtual call-in option. The meeting was called to order by Christopher Corbin at 10:00 a.m.

ROLL CALL:

Organization Representatives

Vermont Career Chiefs Association	Aaron Collette
Secretary of Education	Rob Evans
Vermont Fire Chiefs Association	Absent
Commissioner of the Department of Forest, Parks & Recreation	Lars Lund
Professional Firefighters of Vermont	Christopher Corbin, Chairperson
Commissioner of the Department of Health	Bambi Dame
Vermont State Firefighters Association	F. Thomas Estey
Commissioner of the Department of Labor	Absent
Vermont Domestic Insurance	Absent
Division of Fire Safety Director	Michael Desrochers
General Public	John Marcus, Vice Chairperson
Commissioner of Public Safety Office	Dan Batsie

Other Attendees: Michael Skaza, Jessica Pomainville, Jeff Campbell, Chris Pixley, and Bill Jones

Modification of Meeting Agenda:

None

Approval of Minutes:

Motion made by Chief Estey and seconded Chief Collette to accept the minutes from the November 10, 2022 meetings. Motion passed unanimously.

Report from the Executive Director of the Division of Fire Safety: Director Michael Desrochers

An act relating to worker's compensation coverage for firefighters with cancer (S.73) passed. The Division of Fire Safety must conduct a study over the summer on the financial impact on fire departments to provide cancer screening to all firefighters in the state on both career and volunteer departments and those enrolled in Firefighter I and II. The report must also estimate the cost to replace turnout gear for all firefighters in the state on a ten-year replacement plan. There are various other items that need to be reported on as well.

An act relating to housing opportunities made for everyone (S.100) is a large housing bill that requires the Division to conduct a study on energy efficiency. The Division will be charged with being the Authority having Jurisdiction (AHJ) over energy efficiency codes.

The U.S. Fire Administrator is going to replace the current NFIRS program with a modern

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web-based reporting program that will collect data in real time.

The Division is seeking capital funding for plan development for a USAR/Haz Mat Team/VSP building.

Report from the Chief of Training: Michael Skaza

Two new instructors have been hired since the last meeting. Nate Bourn from Poultney and Brandon Amatrudo from Lebanon Fire Department. Chris Pixley has joined the fire academy as the full-time Program Coordinator. The Fire Academy still has two open full-time positions, the Training Coordinator and the Site Coordinator. Some interest has been shown in the positions however the right fit has not been found. The Site Coordinator position is having a classification review and will be posted after it has been completed. The part-time administrative assistant position has just closed. There were five applications and interviews will happen soon.

Program enrollment update: Danville 14, Grand Isle 20, Morrisville 17, Rutland Town 32, Marlboro 13, Hybrid is at 29, and the Swanton Firefighter II program concluded with 15. Classes are showing a decrease from 7% - 44% in attrition.

The current average age of students in Firefighter I is 33 and in Firefighter II is 31. 82% of our current Firefighter I and II students are male, 17% are female, and 1% is non-binary or nonreporting.

The current fiscal budget is solvent due to vacancy savings and resource limitations limiting some of our offerings. The FY24 budget may be getting an increase.

Regional Fire Schools were offered this year. The VFA is offering the following courses at Regional Fire School's (RFS) this year. Flammable Gas Control was offered at Southern VT RFS but was cancelled due to low enrollment, PPE and SCBA with Drager at Addison RFS, Flashover at North County RFS, Flashover at Twin State RFS, and Flammable Gas Control at Northeast International RFS.

National Fire Academy six day offering of Command and Control in December was very successful. The Fire Academy believes that the availability of dorm space created more opportunities for students to attend. The Fire Academy has requested a Fire Inspection Principals II course, this is a six-day delivery and will be held at the VFA if awarded.

Three state weekend was held on March 10, 11, and 12 and the Vermont student attendance was low. The Fire Academy is looking for new ideas to boost numbers for that. Jeff Campbell states that March dates were difficult due to the weather conditions. The dates the Fire Academy has requested for next year are in June.

National Fire Academy two-day course offerings were successful. Strategy and Tactics Initial Company Operations was held in Chester in January and there were 19 students. Fire Investigation for First Responders was held in Wilmington, also in January, and there were 16 students. Incident Command and Resource Management in Underhill and Shaping the Future in Rutland Town were scheduled for February but cancelled due to low enrollment. Incident Safety Officer that was to be held in Bristol in March had to be rescheduled due to a change in the NFA instructor's availability. It is now rescheduled for May 20 and 21.

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Work on an electric vehicle curriculum is underway. The Fire Officer program is being transitioned to the new standard with a fall delivery expected. The revision of the Fire Instructor program was completed. There is a hybrid Fire Instructor being held currently. The student maximum for Fire Instructor is 20 and there were almost double that in applications. After seeking input from stakeholders, the fire academy has decided to run a second offering of Fire Instructor I at the conclusion of the offering that is currently underway.

Fire Officer will be offered in the fall after the second Fire Instructor offering.

Use of the East Cottage continues to increase. Students are using it on the weekends, career departments are using it during the week when they come to use the site on back-to-back training days. To date there have been 706 overnight stays. The facility makes it easier for students who have a significant travel distance.

The HMEP grant application has been submitted for next year, this would bring \$106,887 in federal funds, and \$26,700 of match, which the VFA matches in kind by calculating the value of our volunteer student hours. This grant allows all of our hazardous materials training to be conducted without using state funding. Part of the project funds VFA training and the other part will fund a position to do hazardous materials compliance under the direction of the State Haz Mat Chief. This is a 9.7% reduction in Haz Mat grant funding. The decrease is out of our control since each state's allocation is determined through a formula that has to do with commodity flow through the state and the number of spills reported. The Chief of Training and the Chief of the Haz Mat Team are reviewing the reporting mechanism to make sure that Vermont is reporting correctly.

The Assistance to Firefighter Grant application has been submitted seeking \$173,772 in federal funds which comes with a \$19,300 local state match. This will continue to fund instructor PPE, one new fully equipped PADO trailer, training mannequins, instructor scheduling software, assorted tools, more furniture props for the burn building, and an additional equipment trailer.

It has become clear that the Fire Academy has a role in fire department recruitment efforts. The Fire Academy worked with the VSFA to obtain a congressionally directed spending award through Senator Sanders which was awarded in the amount of \$150,000. This money will be brought to the VSFA Cadet Academy to help support the effort and grow interest in the program. The VFA, with help from Vermont Emergency Management, was able to secure \$10,000 from the Emergency Management Planning Grant to fund an advertising campaign for Operation Mayday. There will be advertisements run on WCAX television, the website, and across social media platforms highlighting the need for firefighters in Vermont. These advertisements will encourage people to the "Make me a Firefighter" website and encourage people participate in the coordinated statewide recruitment open house event which will be happening on May 13th. To date there are 50 Vermont fire departments who have committed to having a recruitment open house in their fire station.

The Fire Academy continues to struggle with instructor shortages and is struggling to fill instructor assignments across all offerings. There are 86 instructors on the Fire Academy's roster and there are 45 who are affiliated with a volunteer service and 41 who are affiliated with the career fire service. Currently, there is an 8% inactivity rate in the instructors affiliated with the volunteer

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service and a 56% inactivity rate in those affiliated with the career service. The Fire Academy is hearing from instructors that there is so much work in primary jobs and such demand to work overtime and cover shifts that it difficult for dedicate time to a part-time job. This is being heard from some that are not in the career service as well. We see similar conflicts with students who need to withdraw from programs. The Chief of Training has had conversations with the Director and Human Resources about ways to incentivize instructors. About 40% of training requests are being denied. It is not a financial decision, but it is a work force issue. The VFA does not want to award classes that could have to be cancelled because staffing cannot be provided at the last minute.

Discussion took place on what the Academy will do if we see an overwhelming demand for Fire Officer, based on the large demand that we saw for Fire Instructor. Michael Skaza stated that we will enroll as many students as our capacity will allow. Since this program registration is based on equal department disbursement, sending departments will be consulted to rank multiple applicants from each department. Captain Corbin suggested that the Academy have a competitive application process instead of using fair department dispersal. He also suggests that maybe the Career Chiefs should conduct a poll on interest in Fire Officer. Discussion took place on student interest in attending Fire Officer and how many members one department can practically send to the Fire Officer program at one time.

Discussion took place on why instructors are not teaching for the Fire Academy as much as needed. Michael Desrochers suggests that a working group be organized to discuss instructor staffing issues.

Report from the Council Chair:

Nothing to report.

Committees:

Certification Testing Committee (Skaza) – No Report – Remove from future agendas.

Governance Committee (Desrochers) –

The Director has worked with the Commissioner of BGS and \$750,000 has been appropriated to design a retrofit to the Police Academy's main building and the west cottage. This will include doubling the size of the cafeteria. It is a three-year plan that increases the funding over the next four years. This plan includes connecting the campus wastewater line to the municipal wastewater water supply system, which is an important project for the entire campus.

Unfinished Business:

The current Fire Service Training Council rules limit reciprocity approval to applicants who have received their certification in the previous three years. This was originally designed to align with the requirement that says that if a Vermont certified individual failed to obtain the required continuing education hours after a three-year period, they would have to test to regain Vermont certification. It was forcing those seeking reciprocity outside that three-year window to test. This has been identified as an obstacle to bringing firefighters in from other states. A document was shared that proposes a language change for the Council rules.

A discussion took place on the proposed changes as the proposed rule change was reviewed in

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detail. The rule changes will be reviewed by DPS legal during the revision process. The Director suggested that the entire document be reviewed before being submitted.

The Chairperson asks that the Council review the current rules and send any comments to Chief Skaza by May 25. Chief Skaza will send a copy of the current rules to all the members for review.

Chief Skaza presented a proposal to change the way Firefighter programs are awarded. Given the Fire Academy's current resource shortage, the plan has changed a bit as the Fire Academy does not want to overextend itself. FY24 awards will not be affected by the new awarding method. A color coded map was distributed and referenced for this discussion. In FY25 the priority would be for the green counties to be awarded a program, this would include a hybrid offering, in FY26 the blue counties would be the priority, and in FY27 the priority will be those in red. More programs may be awarded if resources are available.

The Fire Academy will empower the county to decide the location within the county. The Fire Academy sends a mass email out soliciting program requests in April. A discussion took place regarding the of balancing equal access to training versus cost effectiveness.

Vermont EMS is using contractors for EMS training and Chief Collette wonders if the Academy has explored this option. The Academy does support local entities coordinating their own training to work towards certification. The Academy has budgeted money for contracting in FY24 but was hoping to use that money towards upper-level classes. Consideration can be given to lower-level classes as well.

There have been conversations about the need for a residential recruit academy. Chief Skaza has been asked to put some information together. The Career Chiefs are offering to send instructors to staff it. It was noted that this would work best if the career departments could follow a common hiring cycle.

FY24 requests will be handled as they have in the past. If resources become more available, then the Fire Academy will offer more.

Chief Collette would like to see some guidelines to share with his county organization.

New Business:

Fire Instructor I has moved to the new edition of NFPA 1041. The Fire Academy pilot delivery has been well received and instructors are being encouraged to teach without PowerPoint presentations as much as possible. The Fire Academy hopes to recruit instructors out of this class.

Standard Operating Guidelines:

Make-up Process SOG - The change is a revision from the original SOG. The changes are highlighted in yellow. ***Motion to endorse the changes in the Make-up Process SOG made by Estey and seconded by Marcus. Motion passed unanimously.***

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Accommodations SOG - The Academy has few requirements surrounding requests accommodations, which has created some issues. Due to the liberal nature of the request process, students are showing up at test sites and requesting accommodations at the last minute. These requests cannot be accommodated because they often place increased demands on staffing requirements and written exams need to be individually prepared for candidates in advance. This is a change with the new testing system that is being used. The Academy wants to formalize the request process to be adequately prepared to provide the accommodations in the best interest of the candidates. The SOG is amended to require a request form be submitted within two weeks prior to the exam date.

There is an error in section 3(d)iii of the SOG - IAP should be changed to IEP. The correction will be made in the final approved copy.

Any accommodation requested cannot negate any required JPR's.

Motion to accept the Accommodations SOG with the amendment from Chief Collette by Collette and seconded by Marcus. Motion passed unanimously.

Coalition Report:

The card room at the State House is booked this year. The Director will contact the Sergeant at Arms to schedule a room for next year.

Vermont Career Chiefs: (Collette)

The last meeting was in March 16.

Vermont State Firefighters Association: (Estey)

The Cadet Academy will be held June 17 – 25 at the Fire Academy.

The Annual Convention will be held on August 4 - 6 in Newport.

Vermont Fire Chiefs: (Bothfield)

Absent

Professional Firefighters of Vermont: (Corbin)

No Report

Agency of Natural Resources: (Lund)

No longer the State Fire Supervisor so that can be removed from his title. Forest Fire meetings are underway they are holding one per county. They are conducting local refresher courses around the state. About \$60,000 worth of wildland gear has disbursed through the grant program.

Department of Education: (Evans)

School Safety legislation is ongoing and there are changes in compliance. There is a worry about how emergency services will gain access to school during an active shooter event. A lot of aftermarket barricading devices are being purchased by schools and conversations should be had between the Fire Marshal's Office and schools prior to these purchases. Captain Corbin asks if

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there has been conversation about funding for collaborative training between fire, EMS, and law enforcement. Rob says that there are several school safety funding opportunities through the Agency of Education, Mental Health, and DPS through the Bureau of Justice Assistance grants that are out there. DPS sponsored a collaboration with the Readiness in Emergency Management for Schools to do a four-hour course on developing an emergency operations plan. About 21-22 different schools attended and some invited their local first responders. DPS is trying to schedule some crisis communication and incident command training for schools over the summer.

Department of Health: (Dame)

Bambi has accepted the EMS Chief position. There are now two positions open in EMS office. Leadership training is going well and there are about 100 people enrolled. EMS week is coming up and EMS award nominations are being accepted.

There will not be another voucher program this year, since they are understaffed, and it was a lot of administrative work. There will be other funding opportunities for education programs which will increase equitable and inclusive training throughout the state. The EMS Office put out bid proposal for programs that would like to offer initial EMS education/refresher training, critical care, critical care and continuing education, and community paramedicine. They will partner with five different programs that will contract with the EMS office and will be responsible for hosting programs throughout the state of Vermont at no cost to participants.

Department of Labor: (Whipple)

Absent

Vermont Domestic Insurance: (Miles)

Absent

General Public: (Marcus)

No Report

The Fire Academy receives very late submittals of recertification paperwork. It was stated that cards may not be issued to individuals this year and future of recertification processes were discussed.

The next meeting is scheduled for Thursday, June 8, 2023 at the Fire Academy in Pittsford.

Lars Lund made a motion to adjourn the meeting, motion seconded by Chief Collette. Motion passed unanimously.