

Vermont Fire Service Training Council
Minutes of the June 9, 2022 Meeting

The meeting was held at the Vermont Department of Public Safety, 45 State Drive, Waterbury 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	Absent
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	Matt Miles
Division of Fire Safety Director	Absent
General Public	John Marcus, Vice Chairperson
Commissioner of Public Safety	Absent

Other Attendees: Michael Skaza, Jessica Pomainville, William Jones, Micah Genzlinger, Ben Whalen

Modification of Meeting Agenda:

None

Approval of Minutes:

Motion made to by Tom Estey and seconded by John Marcus to accept the minutes from the February 10, 2022. Motion passed unanimously.

Report from the Executive Director of the Division of Fire Safety: Absent (report provided by Michael Skaza on behalf of Director Michael Desrochers)

Division of Fire Safety will be purchasing a new database for the Division to use for their fire prevention program activities.

Commissioner Michael Schirling has resigned, and Deputy Commissioner Jennifer Morrison will be the acting Commissioner.

The Division of Fire Safety will be responsible for all rental housing code enforcement and complaints in the near future as S.210 was signed into law transferring primary responsibility from local health officers to the Division of Fire Safety. Towns will still have Health Officers

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and during the next year the Division of Fire Safety will be standing up their program.

The Division is still working on filling positions with the hope of being fully staffed in the next couple of months.

The Division is still seeing a shortfall in plan review revenue but hopes that as we emerge from the pandemic, construction will begin in full force and that will change.

Special Teams funding is still stable and teams are very active, this includes fire investigators, Haz Mat, and USAR teams.

There is a current debate at the National Fire Academy for funding a new system to enhance fire incident reporting.

Report from the Interim Chief of Training: Michael Skaza

A new Administrative Assistant joined the Academy about two weeks ago, and her name is Hannah Spinks.

The Academy has hired or is in the process of hiring 7 new instructors from several different regions of the state.

The Council Representative terms of Aaron Collette and Tom Estey will be expiring on August 31, 2022. Michael Skaza has reached out to their representative organizations and with their approval has submitted their reappointment request to the Governor.

The following statistics were shared regarding FY22 certifications issued within our programs:

- Middlebury Firefighter I certified 14.
- Orleans Firefighter I certified four.
- Brattleboro Firefighter II certified 18.
- Hartland was a combined class and certified 11 to the Firefighter II level and 17 both levels.
- Williston was a combined class. One person certified to Firefighter I, 13 to Firefighter II, and 13 to both levels.
- Fire Officer finished with 17 students certified.

A discussion took place providing an overview of the change in allowing enrollment into only one level of the multi-level programs. The Academy will need to build more time into the schedule between levels to allow more time for enrollment. Overall, this format was popular and provided additional opportunities for candidates to enter certification programs.

The Academy has been supporting local training leading to certification. Franklin County was not awarded a program in FY22, so chose to run a local training program to prepare firefighters to challenge the exam. The Academy supported them with textbooks, curriculum, PPE, and HMO. They did supplement instructors and were invoiced for some offerings that did not meet student minimums.

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The Academy has been working with Williston and Burlington Fire Departments with training for their new hires.

Regional Fire Schools are coming back. NEIMA in Newport had a total of 150 students and the Academy delivered a Flammable Gas Control course there. Twin State had 220 students and the Academy delivered a Modern Fire Behavior – Flashover course there.

Live Fire Exercises within Firefighter I and II has been split into two-day training sessions. This allows for more student contact time to work on practical skills and is less physically demanding than the aggressive one-day session. This caused expanded use of the campus as classes took full advantage of the training props and space available. This caused some unforeseen expenses because the Academy had budgeted for two half-day sessions and most classes made it a full day without cutting back on their outreach hours. The overall student feedback was very positive.

Six in-state two-day National Fire Academy courses were offered this past year. Four of which were held and two were cancelled due to lack of enrollment. NFA classes were held in Alburgh, Poultney, Brattleboro, and Pittsford (VFA).

Three-state weekend was held the beginning of June on the Campus of the National Fire Academy in Emmitsburg, MD. Nine students from Vermont attended along with the Alabama and New Hampshire students. The Academy will work on expanding the number of students who attend next year.

The Fire Academy partnered with the Propane Gas Association of New England (PGANE) to deliver four offerings of their four-hour propane emergency awareness courses. About 110 responders were trained. The team from PGANE is great to work with and the State Haz-Mat Team Members attended and supported those trainings as well.

The VFA is working on curriculum projects. Bill Jones is working with a subject matter expert group to perform maintenance on the Haz Mat Awareness and Operations curricula now that it has been delivered for a couple of years. Micah Genzlinger is working on a Vehicle Extrication Technician course and the curriculum development is now complete. The Academy will be planning a Train-the-Trainer for the Vehicle Rescue Technician course this fall. Ben Whalen is working with a subject matter expert group to revise Rope Operations to transition to the CMC textbook with hopes of two offerings this summer/fall.

Fire Instructor I is being reviewed and will be moved to the next edition of the Jones and Bartlett text. There is very little change. The Fire Academy will be submitting for accreditation for the new edition. Once Fire Instructor I is submitted to Pro Board, the Academy will turn its focus to developing Fire Instructor II and bringing that level on.

There are several requests for Pumping Apparatus Operator/Driver. The Academy committed to delivering three courses in FY23 and alternate the course locations North/South. With demand being so high the Academy identified a need for more instructors, and therefore is offering a hybrid program for instructors this summer bringing the total number of PADO offerings to four in FY23.

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The East Cottage is complete however a few issues have come up. There have been about 90 overnight stays in the East Cottage since it opened. The control module for cooling is not working, however BGS is installing temporary window mounted units until it can be fixed. The project manager did not like the seams of the carpet, so it has been completely recarpeted. Students have really enjoyed the availability and use of the dorms. Use of the dorm has been extended the Haz Mat and USAR Teams. The dorms will be fully occupied by the VSFA Cadet Academy in June.

Acadis will be going live on July 1st. Full-time staff attended a week-long training on the new training management application. All written certification testing has been moved from the legacy system to Acadis. A coordinator was sent to these exam locations since the testing procedure has changed to improve exam security.

Senator Sanders is seeking a legislative spending effort (earmark money) for the VSFA Cadet Academy. He asked the Academy to write a proposal for him to sponsor an earmark for the Cadet Academy. A request for \$150,000 in federal funding has been submitted by the VFA and VSFA for the expansion and support of the Cadet Academy. If the earmark is approved there would be about three, four-day sessions of Cadet Academy in the summer. It has the potential to triple the number of participants.

Vermont's largest job fair was held on April 26th at the Champlain Valley Exposition. The Fire Academy attended along with representatives from the Vermont State Firefighters Association, Coalition of Fire and Rescue, and Vermont Career Fire Chiefs with a focus on fire service recruitment. A lot of contacts were made with potential applicants who were able to learn more about the Vermont Fire Service. Many high school students attended the event.

Discussion of the Orleans program finishing with only four students. They began with over 15 students and quickly dropped to eight, however the Academy was committed to holding the class. There were some other students who dropped and a few that failed Haz Mat Operations. A total of five tested and four certified. The Northeast Kingdom is a tough area to serve with getting students enrolled and helping them to be successful. While many of these students were not certified, most will continue responding to emergency calls and now have more training than they did previously.

The combined Firefighter classes and the Fire Officer program all finished strong. The hybrid offering of the Fire Officer allowed for students from all over the state to attend. The Fire Academy has ideas of how to make hybrid learning better and admits that hybrid learning is not for everyone nor every subject.

Chris Corbin asked if the Fire Academy will have the ability grow the technology to support the hybrid offerings of programs. Michael Skaza explained that funding would need to come from the operating budget or AFG. The Division of Fire Safety did pursue ARPA funding, but those requests were not approved for technology enhancements.

A discussion took place concerning the success of the allowing students to take just one level of combined Firefighter programs. Unfortunately, the number of combined classes must remain limited if the Academy is going to be able to staff other programs simultaneously.

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Aaron Collette informed the Council that the Director is looking to move Michael Skaza into the Chief of Training position. The Director has had conversations with stakeholders about this appointment and has heard positive feedback. Aaron Collette shared information from the Coalition meeting where this occurred. A discussion took place stating that a review of Michael's vacant position would be conducted so that the position can be best used to move the VFA Strategic Plan forward. The Academy has a limited staff of seven, so every position must be utilized to its fullest.

Report from the Council Chair:

None

Committees:

Certification Testing Committee (Skaza) – No report other than the Academy is waiting to see how the Acadis transition goes with respect to certification testing. Once that hurdle is complete hopefully this committee can begin its work.

Governance Committee (Skaza) –

Two studies will be performed in the coming year, the first looking at whether the Firing Range can be improved to eliminate icing, and the another looking to determine what the best use of the Main Building space is. Once, these studies are completed capital work on the complex should start moving forward.

Director Michael Desrochers is working to schedule a Governance Committee meeting soon. There is new leadership at the Police Academy, so it is good time to meet and get on one page for the direction of the campus. Ben Whalen is working on the Safety Committee meeting.

The Williston Fire Department used the dorms; however, food services were not available which seemed unfair. The East Cottage occupants are not permitted to add to the wastewater generation of the kitchen. The governance committee has a goal of connecting the complex to the municipal wastewater system. In the interim they are monitoring actual wastewater flow to prove that the existing wastewater system can meet the actual demand. The Academy does recommend that dorm occupants use local stores or catering for food needs in the interim.

Unfinished Business:

None.

New Business:

Standard Operating Guidelines:

Make-up process SOG change in section 7 clears up what a student's options are if they exhaust their make-ups attempts. The guideline calls for a coordinator to have a conversation with the student about their continuance in the program and eligibility for testing or additional courses within the program.

Motion to endorse the Make-Up Process SOG made by Marcus, seconded by Estey. Motion passes unanimously.

Recertification SOG changes the recertification term dates to mirror the change made by the

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Council.

Motion to approve the changes to the Recertification SOG made Lund and seconded by Estey. Motion passes unanimously, with the change to the spelling of the word policies.

The Return to Physical Activity after Medical Event SOG revision was sent out previously and there is no discussion. Added illness to section 1. Aaron Collette asks if there needs to be a change made to the use of the word doctor to qualified healthcare provider. Michael Skaza agrees to this change as it will align with the same language that the VFA uses in their Respiratory Protection Plan. Lars Lund asks if there is a form for the student to bring to the healthcare provider for clearance. All students are provided with physical performance requirements at the start of the class, so it is upon the students to bring those to the healthcare provider. Most letters from providers come back with specific performance requirements detailed on them. Lars Lund suggests that perhaps a set form be utilized in the future. Discussion of not making the return-to-work requirement be more stringent than the requirement to get into class.

Michael Skaza will reach out to NFTDA and see what they require for screening. New Hampshire requires a more stringent screening process prior to class with the job performances listed on their form that students must return with their application. They have seen very little improvement of the screening of students prior to class that is filled out by a healthcare provider.

Aaron Collette makes a motion to move forward the Return to Physical Activity after Medical Event SOG revision with the amendments that were discussed. Meaning the qualified medical personnel and yellow highlight changes. Chris Corbin states that a motion is not needed, so Aaron Collette agrees that if this has been the process for the last five years and no challenges have come up that the process can remain the same and rescinds his motion. Chris Corbin asks Michael Skaza to do some more research on what other agencies do in regard to screening.

In late April/early May the Academy asked for training program requests for FY23. In that announcement, it was indicated that requests would receive higher weight if they were submitted by a county organization rather than individual departments, demonstrated regional cooperation, they had a demonstrated student need backed by application for pre-registration purposes, and they would be weighted based on frequency of training opportunities in that geographical location. This has been the practice for awarding Firefighter programs for many years. A total of 14 requests were made by the June 1st deadline. The requests are plotted on the map that was distributed at the meeting and my e-mail to those attending virtually.

- Marlboro – county-based request, 1 student application attached.
- Chelsea – single department request
- East Montpelier - single department request, 8 student applications attached.
- Barnet - single department request
- Morrisville – department request but organized regionally, 13 student applications attached.
- Lyndonville – single department request

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- Danville - single department request but had multiple departments organized with them, 10 student applications attached.
- Richford - single department request
- Swanton – single department request on behalf of the region, 15 student applications attached.
- Grand Isle - single department request, 7 student applications attached.
- Underhill - single department request with the backing of the Chittenden County Chiefs
- Global Foundries – single entity request, 7 student applications attached.
- Middlebury – county request
- Rutland Town – county request, 10 student applications attached.

Some applications came in after the deadline, but not many.

The Academy staff had a meeting to review these requests, identify where courses have been held previously, assess what we have for requests for this year, and quantify where the student numbers seem to be seated. The Academy recommends the following programs be awarded:

- Marlboro – Firefighter I
- Rutland Town – Firefighter I/II
- Morrisville – Firefighter I
- Danville – Firefighter I
- Grand Isle – Firefighter I
- Swanton – Firefighter II

The number was arrived at by determining what number of programs the budget will support and still allow the Academy to accomplish the other training that needs to get done in this fiscal year. The Academy recognizes that this is good disbursement, but there are pockets of the state that would have considerable travel to some locations. To lessen the travel burden, the Academy proposes to offer a hybrid Firefighter I in addition to the programs listed above. The hybrid Firefighter I would provide didactic lessons virtually and online. Practical sessions will be held on full weekend days at the Academy in Pittsford. It is felt that this provides a statewide training opportunity. Those that have travel issues could utilize the dorm space. Tom Estey asked if the Academy thinks there would be interest in a full day on Saturday, then four hours on Sunday. Michael Skaza says that anything would be on the table. The Academy thinks that the hybrid would allow those who don't have a close in-person class location an option to attend.

There is discussion surrounding the impacts of not approving a program within Chittenden and Addison Counties. The VFA could not overlook the requests from some historically underserved regions, and they feel it is important to put training in those regions this year. Both Chittenden and Addison Counties have had successful consecutive programs year after year, making this a hard decision. However, given the available funding and instructor resources available to the VFA, they feel that is the way to move forward this year.

Chris Corbin voices concerns that approving requests in underserved regions may result in less certifications because student numbers decrease, and that if areas that have been successful in the past are not awarded, potential students won't be given the opportunity to certify.

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Discussion that for the last three years Rutland County students have traveled to Addison County and supported Addison and Bennington County requests and have not submitted one until this year.

The Academy also spent time calculating the average drive time to programs with a goal of keeping it under 40 minutes. The northern Chittenden County students have a reasonable commute to the Grand Isle program offering. The Morristown offering may be a challenge for western Chittenden County students in the winter but students from eastern Chittenden County could be there in a reasonable amount of time. The Hybrid is also being offered to address the concern of no local program offering. The student population in Chittenden County is typically a student group that is comfortable using technology, so the VFA thought a hybrid offering would benefit this group, who may not have a local offering.

Aaron Collette stated that he feels that we have missed an opportunity to collect further data by requiring applications for pre-registration and not polling the potential student enrollment in some other way. When he sees something like this, he has real concerns that the Council has lost track of the mission of the Academy. Chris Corbin aired concern that the most populous area of the state doesn't have anything on the schedule, and he doesn't know if the VSFA has power to push the under-represented counties to identify what their needs are. It was acknowledged that it is difficult to count potential student numbers without knowing an exact location due to great variations in travel times.

The announcement asks for the requestor to demonstrate the student numbers by sending the VFA applications for pre-registration and that is not a commitment. These pre-registration numbers are used to identify the needs-based requests. As coordinators are visiting county organizations, they are emphasizing the importance of submitting requests with applications because that demonstrates need. Michael Skaza had a discussion with the Underhill requestor in January asking him to send in applications with their request, so that he had six months to recruit applications.

A question is asked about the Marlboro request and why it was approved. It was explained that this was a county request and the VFA felt that an offering had to be made in southern Vermont. No request was made by Bennington or Windsor County and the Academy was looking for something south of the Route 4 line.

Chris Corbin questioned if there is a model that would look at demand and not necessarily who wanted to host a program. The Academy has been asking the fire service to show us where the demand is for the past 5 years. Chris Corbin asked if there is another method to get that demand from the actual firefighters.

Aaron Collette proposed a student focused survey based on GIS that would identify regional of need using a geo-fence. In this system, student need would be identified by the geographic location of their response. The current system relies on polling the Chief's, so he feels that there is a need for a system that is not an administrative process that is overlooked by a failure of leadership. It is pointed out that this poll would be relying on the same leadership the VFA depends on now.

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Discussion of different ways to communicate with the fire service and the fact that departments can share a border but are unwilling to talk to one another to communicate and come to a middle ground on program location.

Discussion of the map outlining the fiscal year workplan. Fire Officer is not on the schedule currently.

Discussion that Middlebury has hosted a program for the last five years. The number of students started at 40, then 35, then 30, then 25, and continues to decrease. For budgetary reasons the Academy cannot award a program in every county, every year if the goal is to offer more than just Firefighter programs.

Bambi Dame (EMS) asked if the Academy tracks attrition to identify trends. It was stated that failure to complete is most often attributed to the complications of life's schedule and is often not attributed to academic failure. The Academy depends primarily on the lead instructors to work one-on-one with students to identify skills that need more practice, and we encourage students to work with their departments for these extra needs.

Anecdotally, the attrition is due to life situations, whether it be a new job, family commitments, etc. The new data management system will be able to track these reasons more particularly. Lars Lund asked if programs that drop below a student minimum can be switched to a hybrid. The VFA explained how that would be difficult because not all students who register for an in-person class can be successful in a hybrid environment. We know that not all students are equipped to be hybrid learners.

The Academy in the past has merged two programs together to save money on practicals and the students disliked the change. When the Orleans program numbers dropped the Academy looked at different ways to merge them with other classes, but there were no options within a reasonable distance to accomplish it.

Discussion on if Addison or Chittenden are awarded, how do we identify who gets cuts? Chris Corbin stated that he considers the VFA staff as subject matter experts of how program locations are selected based on the advertised criteria. He doesn't think that the Council haphazardly awarding programs proves anything, however, he does think there must be a better way to determine the needs in the state.

Aaron Collette stated that he will not support the recommended program awards because the recommendation is missing areas that need to have programs. He thinks that those areas will find their own way to deliver their own programs if awards continue in this format. He agrees with the Chair that it cannot be this way next year. He also referred to an email that says you only need the 15 students prior to the start date. He stated that it does not say that the host location needs to include applications with their request. The Career Fire Chiefs have a lot of up-and-coming, growing fire departments that are staffing with full-time people. This includes Essex, who just two days prior advertised full-time positions; Charlotte, who has been advertising for five full time positions; and Hinesburg, who is advertising for full-time positions.

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For these reasons, he indicated that this program award plan does not meet the needs of the Career Chiefs. He believes there must be a better way than the way the VFA is awarding classes and he believes the process is broken on the allocation of courses.

There is a discussion of the rest of the program and course awards for FY23. There will be more standalone awards that are not plotted on the map.

Michael Skaza asked the Chair for a 10-minute recess to confer with the Fire Academy Staff, which was granted.

When the meeting resumed, Michael Skaza asked the Council to move forward with the endorsement of an amended plan. The amendment offers to hold a Firefighter I program in southern Chittenden or northern Addison County if another Firefighter I program is cancelled due to low enrollment or if the host declines the award.

A motion is made by Tom Estey to endorse the proposed program locations as recommended by the Fire Academy and seconded by John Marcus. As the vote was called, it was identified that the quorum has been lost as voting members lost remote connections. Motion tabled.

There is a discussion surrounding a concept of offering Firefighter programs to each county on an every-other-year rotation. The concept would be that half of the counties would receive a program offer in the odd year, and the other counties would be offered in the even years. It was agreed that the concept should be explored further.

Aaron Collette would like the Fire Academy to explore the development of a collector tool, to assess potential student numbers so that the Academy and Council can have a better understanding of where the needs are for Firefighter I programs.

A discussion took place on whether a committee should be formed to explore how to improve the award of training programs. No action was taken on this issue.

It was identified that a quorum has been re-established as remote members regained their connections.

The Chair called a vote on the previously tabled motion. The motion passed, 4-1.

Coalition Report:

No legislative action was taken and there is another meeting next month.

Vermont Career Chiefs: (Collette)

The New England Chiefs Conference will be held in Worcester on June 22 – 25.

Vermont State Firefighters Association: (Estey)

Cadet Academy will start on June 18. The Convention is August 12, 13, and 14 in Bennington.

Vermont Fire Chiefs: (Bothfield)

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Absent

Professional Firefighters of Vermont: (Corbin)

No Report

Agency of Natural Resources: (Lund)

Northeast Supervisor meeting will be held in person for the first time in three years.

Department of Education: (Evans)

Absent

Department of Health: (Dame)

COVID HOC has been closed. The EMS office received a grant to add administrative staff to help with the COVID work. Discussion of upcoming EMS classes that will be offered in the next year. EMS will be offering an in-person EMS conference this year. There is a lot of attrition in EMS. EMS is going to start a leadership plan and invites Fire Academy to join. There was delay in getting background checks done on license applicants.

Department of Labor: (Whipple)

No Report

Vermont Domestic Insurance: (Miles)

No Report

General Public: (Marcus)

No Report

The next meeting is scheduled for Thursday, October 13, 2022 at the Vermont Fire Academy.

Tom Estey made a motion to adjourn the meeting, motion seconded by John Marcus. Motion passes unanimously.