

**Vermont Fire Service Training Council**  
*Minutes of the February 8, 2024 Meeting*

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The meeting was held at the Vermont Fire Academy Administrative Building in Pittsford and included a virtual call-in option. The meeting was called to order by Chair John Marcus at 10:00 a.m.

**ROLL CALL:**

**Organization Representatives**

Vermont Career Chiefs Association	Aaron Collette
Secretary of Education	Absent
Vermont Fire Chiefs Association	Skip Bothfield (virtual)
Commissioner of the Department of Forest, Parks & Recreation	Devin Nealy (virtual)
Professional Firefighters of Vermont	Josh Kirtlink – Proxy (virtual)
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 (virtual)
General Public	John Marcus, Vice Chairperson
Commissioner of Public Safety	Dan Batsie (virtual)

Other Attendees: Michael Skaza, Jessica Pomainville, Bill Jones, Christopher Pixley, and Lars Lund

**Modification of Meeting Agenda:**

John Marcus and Chief Michael Skaza thanked Lars Lund for his 16 years of service as a member of the Vermont Fire Service Training Council and presented him with a commendation from the Department of Public Safety.

**Approval of Minutes:**

*Motion made by Chief Estey and seconded by Chief Collette to accept the minutes from the October 12, 2023 meeting with a correction on Page 4. The word “Roper” should read “Ropes”. Motion passed.*

*Motion made by Chief Estey and seconded by Chief Collette to accept the minutes from the Public Meeting held on January 8, 2024. Motion passed.*

**Report from the Executive Director of the Division of Fire Safety:** Director Desrochers and Deputy Commissioner Batsie will be testifying about the DPS budget in House Appropriations.

The Division of Fire Safety is following several bills that are moving through the legislature.

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A new NFIRS reporting database is being implemented and the National Association of State Fire Marshals is worried about the continuity from the old system to the new system. He encouraged people to view the demo of how the new database will work, which is available online.

The Division is trying to develop an expedited permitting processes to get ahead of the anticipated need for housing development.

Chief Collette stated that he appreciates that there was an ability to view and contribute to the new NFIRS reporting database.

### **Report from the Chief of Training: Michael Skaza**

A candidate has accepted a conditional offer of employment for the Training Coordinator position. If all goes well, the VFA expects to have this position filled by March 25<sup>th</sup>. The Site Coordinator position has been posted several times and interviews have been conducted without success. The position has been reposted.

Andrew Carbine, Chuck Keir, and Phil Bourne have resigned as VFA instructors. Jacob Astbury (Pomfret) has joined the VFA as a new instructor. The VFA has interviewed two instructor candidates and is in the process of hiring one of them, and the other has been invited to begin the hiring process.

An instructor engagement survey was performed in November and the common responses included feedback about pay and overtime, and we confirmed that many other things that were competing for temporary employee's free time.

The FY24 budget is solvent with vacancy savings being incurred. The FY25 budget has been submitted to the administration and was essentially level-funded.

The VFA is watching a few bills in the legislature. S.130 Flood Recovery and Mitigation Bill, which initially proposed funding a mitigation grant fund by piggybacking onto the insurance assessment that currently funds the Fire Service Training Special Fund. H.593, which is a Refundable Income Tax Credit for qualified emergency responders was referred to Ways and Means and has been introduced in committee. This bill charges the Training Council to promulgate rules to define active service for volunteer firefighters for purposes of determining eligibility for the tax credit.

The VFA is currently managing \$1,029,026 across seven different grant awards. The HMEP grant is expecting a potential 38% reduction in award for next year. The VFA applied for \$150,000 in federal DOL grant funds to support the VSFA Cadet Academy with a pass-through grant. The intent is to take away the fee for the attendees and support the Cadet Academy. The Federal funds will go to the Department of Public Safety and then the money will be sub-granted to the VSFA Cadet Academy. The Cadet Academy is opting to use volunteers at this time, meaning the instructors would be covered under their organization.

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Chief Skaza reported on the current student enrollment numbers in ongoing or recently completed programs as follows.

<b>Program</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Orientation</b>	<b>Current</b>	
Firefighter I	Bethel	26	21	In progress
Firefighter I/II	Ludlow	39	8	8 finished as just FFI students
Firefighter I	Middlebury	33	28	In progress
Firefighter I/II	Shelburne	37	14	14 finished as just FFI students
Firefighter I	Sheldon	22	14	In progress
Fire Officer I/II	Hybrid/VFA	15	13	Completed
PADO	Stowe	12	12	In progress
PADO	Woodstock	11	12	Completed
<b>Total</b>		<b>183</b>	<b>168 (92%)</b>	Retention in above programs
Firefighter II	Ludlow	32 registered		Started January 25
Firefighter II	Shelburne	26 registered		Starts February 14

In anticipation of a Firefighter I Hybrid delivery in the next fiscal year, the VFA has put together a Hybrid Team to work on the delivery of this product. The VFA is adding technology packages to adequately support the project and will be providing working sessions for the team to develop virtual instructional skills.

The VFA is working to renew a contract for delivery of Rope Rescue Operations in the Spring of 2024. The VFA has an RFP out seeking to deliver Ice, Surface Water, and Swiftwater courses. It was explained that the Surface Water course is in response to recent flooding.

The VFA has received proposals for outside contractor-delivered training in instructor development, advanced leadership training, strategy and tactics, etc. The VFA is in the process of selecting some of these trainings to offer.

The VFA is in the early planning of an Instructor Development Day/Conference.

The VFA plans to deliver a Vehicle Rescue Technician hybrid course to be offered later this summer.

The VFA coordinated a Regional Fire School Group meeting that was held at the Fire Academy and virtually on October 26, 2023. The 2024 Regional Fire Schools are as follows: Addison County: April 20 & 21 (Ventilation), Northeast International Mutual Aid: April 27 & 28 (EVDT), Twin State: May 4 & 5 (EVDT), and North Country: June 1 & 2 (Flashover)

The National Fire Academy Course in-state offerings have been well received. DMICO was completed in Warren on January 6 & 7, 2024 with 21 students. Incident Safety Officer was completed in Newport on January 20 & 21, 2024, with 15 students. Fire Investigation for First

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Responder in Addison County (Middlebury) was held on February 10 & 11, 2024. Exercising Leadership through Difficult Conversation was held in Chittenden County (Williston) on February 24 & 25, 2024. Incident Command System and Resource Management for the Fire Service was held in Rutland County (Castleton) on March 9 & 10, 2024. The PICO class scheduled for Bennington County (Bennington Rural) on March 23 & 24, 2024 was cancelled due to low enrollment. The Fire Inspection Principles II: Inspection of Structures and Systems scheduled for March 18 – 23, 2024 was postponed due to lack of NFA instructors. Three State weekend will be on June 22 & 23, 2024 and we would like to increase our student numbers.

Upon conclusion of this year's Hazardous Materials Operations classes, we will convene a subject matter expert group to perform a comprehensive review of the curriculum and certification exam instruments. This is standard practice after using a new edition for a full season. This review will be based on feedback from instructors and students as well as test analysis.

Despite a 30% full-time staff vacancy, the VFA course offerings increased by 60% in the last year and Firefighter certification issuance increased by nearly 10%.

The Lithium-Ion Battery Fire Awareness course has trained 634 students since launching in October. The largest venue to date was in West Pawlet with 101 students in attendance.

The Fire Officer I/II program was completed with 13 students certifying. Enrollment was 15 students at the start of the class.

A Challenge Exam was held for Firefighter I and II, conveying 16 certifications across both levels.

The Division of Fire Safety convened a Firefighter Cancer Working Group that produced a report to the legislature in response to Act 26. A lot of information was learned when putting together the report.

To date, the VFA East Cottage Dorm has had 1,081 overnight stays.

The VFA is carefully watching the new proposed OSHA 1910.156 Emergency Response Rule which is currently in the public comment period. Over two dozen consensus standards are being incorporated into the proposed rule. This rule change touches everything from new firefighting and PPE requirements, to EMS, to technical search and rescue. This rule change dramatically affects emergency response operations for private employers and for municipal emergency services in states with state OSHA plans. There is a lot to digest and this will have significant impacts on Vermont fire department's training, budgets, and personnel.

### **Governance Committee**

The Governance Committee met on January 3, 2024 to review and adopt the Safety Report and forward it to the Legislature. The VFA had two reportable injuries in 2023, both knee injuries from student over-use. The Director invited Council members to join the governance committee.

### **Unfinished Business: Update on VFSTC Rules (Marcus)**

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The proposed rule changes were submitted to the Interagency Committee on Administrative Rules (ICAR) on November 3, 2023. On November 13, 2023, Chair Marcus and Chief Skaza appeared before ICAR to present the rules, which were accepted. The proposed rules were filed with the Secretary of State's Office on November 29, 2023. Public notices were posted online with the draft on December 6, 2023, and the public comment period opened on that day. On December 14, 2023, public notices were published in the newspapers of record. The Public Hearing was held on January 8, 2024, and no one attended except for Chair Marcus and Chief Skaza. On January 16, 2024, the Public Comment Period closed and there was one comment that was received in favor of the proposed rules from the Professional Fire Fighters of Vermont. On February 2, 2024, the final proposed rule filing was submitted to the Legislative Committee on Administrative Rules (LCAR). On February 29, 2024, the final rule change will be presented to LCAR. If approved the rules will go into effect 15 days after the adoption.

A follow-up report on the waivers approved at the last meeting was provided by Chief Skaza. The certification waiver that was granted to the Rutland City firefighter has been closed since the Firefighter obtained certification to a higher level in December. The Brattleboro firefighter who was granted a waiver is believed to be preparing to challenge this spring. The Springfield firefighter who had a conditional waiver pending with the Council has had that waiver denied for failing to submit 24 hours of continued firefighter training to the VFA Chief of Training for validation. The submittal contained gaps in the training years, therefore, the waiver was denied on October 26, 2023, and the VFA has had no further contact with the firefighter.

### **New Business:**

Chief Brad Reed of the St. Johnsbury Fire Department submitted a comment about ten days after the public comment period had closed for the Rules changes. The Council was unable to consider his proposal because it was too late in the process. When the Council originally considered the changes to reciprocity it was only for those not already in the Vermont recertification system. The Council deliberately considers those coming from outside Vermont looking for certification different from those who are already within the Vermont system and who decertify and want to regain certification. The change was made to allow for an easier application from those out of state wanting to enter the Vermont Fire Service. Discussion surrounding that some firefighters do not understand the status of their certification. A discussion that certified individuals who are falling out of compliance are sent a decertification warning letter and eventually a decertification letter. The Chief of Training will draft a letter to respond to the St. Johnsbury Fire Chief.

Chief Estey has reviewed the IFSTA 7<sup>th</sup> edition Hazardous Materials Operations (HMO) curriculum versus the basic HMO content within the IFSTA 5<sup>th</sup> edition Essentials manual, leading Chief Estey to think that the HMO program should be reviewed and that the content could be reduced. There was a discussion about what is within the PowerPoint presentation that the VFA currently uses. NFPA 1001 sets the minimum hazardous material training at the Firefighter I level as Awareness, Operations, PPE, and Product Control. The VFSTC had previously decided that in addition to the requirements set by NFPA 1001, we will teach our students technical decontamination, metering, and some illicit lab awareness.

Lt. Josh Kirtlink who led a Firefighter program last year commented that he agreed with Chief

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Estey and that reducing the number of hours should be explored. Lt. Kirtlink was surprised that the new curriculum added content.

There was a discussion about the increase in content being partly because the job performance requirements (JPR) under NFPA 472 were a couple of sentences each, however, the JPRs under the new NFPA 470 standard are paragraphs long.

Discussion was had clarifying that candidates who apply for reciprocity for Firefighter I or higher and have a minimum certification of HMO Awareness, Operations, PPE, and Product Control will be accepted for reciprocity purposes.

Chief Estey and Lt. Kirtlink recommend that the metering be covered under the Salvage and Overhaul content and that a further conversation needs to be had regarding technical decontamination. Chief Skaza recommends bringing the State Haz Mat Team Chief into the conversation. Most states only cover what is the minimally required by NFPA 1001.

Chief Estey would like to put a committee together to discuss this further and do some fact-finding. Chief Estey, Lt. Kirtlink, and Chief Skaza were appointed to the committee with Chief Estey serving as the Chair. They will report back at the June meeting.

*Instructor Preparation Time SOG* is operational so it is informational.

The *Program Location SOG* establishes priority years guaranteeing a request approved on a three-year schedule. Counties who are a priority will be considered first and then other requests may be considered if resources are available.

***Chief Estey makes a motion to approve the Program Location SOG effective for programs starting on or after July 1, 2024, seconded by John Marcus.***

There is discussion about the motion and Chief Collette gives a personal perspective on how he remembers the days when the Vermont Fire Academy had a more robust Firefighter I outreach delivery. He is disappointed with this program location process because there is now less opportunity to get new members trained quickly because of a level-funded budget and resource constraints. He believes that the VFSTC and the Fire Academy has gone backward and not progressed enough. Chief Skaza stated that he has presented this idea at fire service meetings across the state and it has been well accepted because it brings predictability to the award process.

***Motion passes and Chief Collette abstains from the motion.***

### **Coalition Report: (Desrochers)**

The Director is working with Representative Shaw on a House Resolution to recognize the emergency responders for all the work done in flood recovery. The Coalition will be meeting on Monday, February 12 and are tracking the progress of several bills in the legislature.

### **Vermont Career Chiefs: (Collette)**

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The next Career Chiefs meeting will be in South Burlington, and there are several issues that will be addressed such as H.622, the OSHA rule, and Chief Francis is going to present on Lithium-Ion.

Chief Collette asked if the Academy could show the distribution of fire departments by the status of paid, paid on-call, or “something else”. Discussion that this could be hard to produce because the Fire Academy legacy database did not track this information.

Chief Collette asked if students in a combined Firefighter program can test out at each level separately. It was explained that this is allowed, and the Fire Academy is going to be making more adjustments to the management of this to handle it better administratively.

**Vermont State Firefighters Association: (Estey)**

The Cadet Academy will be held on July 7 through 14. At this time there is no location for the convention, but they are working to find one.

**Vermont Fire Chiefs: (Skip Bothfield)**

Capital Fire Mutual Aid has been working on a Firefighter I request and they have 31 applications. They will submit this information.

**Professional Firefighters of Vermont: (Kirtlink)**

Departed meeting prior to report being called for.

**Agency of Natural Resources: (Healy)**

Three full-time fire staff are now on board. There are 12 Fire Warden meetings coming up. There are three wildland trainings scheduled.

**Department of Education: (Absent)**

Absent

**Department of Health: (Dame)**

The Department of Health has been working with Emergency Management on planning for the solar eclipse. There are about 200,000 visitors expected for this event. The Department of Health is encouraging providers to plan.

The Department of Health is planning its annual conference in Jay Peak on June 12 – 16.

The Department of Health is watching three legislative bills and expects increased testimony over the next few months.

**Department of Labor: (Absent)**

No Report

**Vermont Domestic Insurance: (Absent)**

No report

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**General Public: (Marcus)**

UVM is planning for the eclipse.

The next meeting is scheduled for Monday, June 10, 2024, at 10:00 a.m. with the location to be determined. Chief Collette offered to place it on the Williston calendar as a placeholder.

*Chief Estey makes a motion to adjourn the meeting, seconded by Marcus. The motion passed unanimously.*

DRAFT