

Vermont Fire Service Training Council
Minutes of the June 10, 2024 Meeting

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

ROLL CALL:

Organization Representatives

Vermont Career Chiefs Association	Aaron Collette (virtual)
Secretary of Education	Absent
Vermont Fire Chiefs Association	Absent
Commissioner of the Department of Forest, Parks & Recreation	Devin Healy
Professional Firefighters of Vermont	Alex Spencer
Commissioner of the Department of Health	Will Moran
Vermont State Firefighters Association	F. Thomas Estey
Commissioner of the Department of Labor	Dan Whipple (virtual)
Vermont Domestic Insurance	Matt Miles (virtual)
Division of Fire Safety Director	GJ Garrow (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 Joe Clark

Approval of Minutes:

Motion made by Chief Estey and seconded by Chief Moran to accept the minutes from the February 8, 2024 meeting. Motion passed.

Modification of Meeting Agenda:

Chief Michael Skaza asked to add an agenda item under new business called Firefighter Combined Level Testing changes.

Motion to add combined level testing under new business made by Lt. Spencer, seconded by Chief Estey. Motion passed.

Report from the Executive Director of the Division of Fire Safety: Gerald Garrow

No Report other than to thank the Academy for the Fire Inspection Principals class held last week and for the upcoming offering of Fire Inspector I/II program.

Report from the Chief of Training: Michael Skaza

Vermont Fire Service Training Council Minutes of the June 10, 2024 Meeting

Introduction of new Training Coordinator Joe Clark who started on March 25th. The Site Coordinator position has been posted several times and interviews have been conducted without success. The position has been reposted.

Thomas Zecher has joined us as a new instructor. We have two instructor candidates that are in the process of being hired.

The Academy has changed the policy regarding pay for instructor preparation time. Instructors are now allowed to receive pay for actual time spent on lesson preparation up to the length of the classroom presentation and for one hour of practical session preparation. This change is to encourage better lesson preparation and to offer compensation for this work. Instructors are also now paid overtime for work over 8 hours per day or 40 hours per week. Previously, overtime was not paid for work over 8 hours in one day. This was an item identified as an area for improvement in our Instructor Engagement Survey.

It was a busy legislative year with many bills affecting the Fire Academy. S.309 Miscellaneous Transportation Bill requires special “EV license plates” on fully-electric and hybrid vehicles to aid first responders with identification of electric vehicles. This bill will be effective July 1, 2026 on newly issued plates, and on July 1, 2028 for all-electric vehicles.

H.593 is a refundable income tax credit for qualified emergency responders that was referred to Ways and Means and was introduced in committee but was not acted upon. This bill charges the Council to promulgate rules to define active service for volunteer firefighters for purposes of determining eligibility for the tax credit.

H.55 is an act relating to miscellaneous unemployment insurance amendments that is pending approval of the amendment in the Senate. It may be voted out during the veto session. This bill directs DFS to conduct semi-annual surveys of the fire service to collect data on firefighter demographics, earnings, and fire response activity. It also directs DFR to report semi-annually on worker’s compensation claims for firefighter cancer including the number approved or denied, types of cancer, and recommendations to address the occurrence of cancer in firefighters. In addition, it directs DFS to subsidize the cost of firefighter cancer screening for Vermont firefighters and enrollees in Firefighter I programs using multi-cancer blood tests, ultrasound, and other medically acceptable screening methods to the extent that funding is appropriated. Funding is contingent on FY24 surplus budget funds.

S.310 is an act relating to natural disaster government response, recovery, and resiliency. Currently, \$150,000 is transferred from the Fire Service Training Special Fund to the EMS Special Fund annually. S.310 increases the amount of the insurance assessment by \$300,000, for a total of \$450,000 to be transferred to the EMS Special Fund annually beginning in FY25. This increased funding allocation for EMS does not reduce the funding of the Fire Service Training Special Fund.

The Academy is expected to end the Fiscal Year 24 with some carry-forward funds due to vacancy savings. The approved FY25 budget is essentially level-funded.

**Vermont Fire Service Training Council
Minutes of the June 10, 2024 Meeting**

Currently the Fire Academy is managing \$1,179,026 across 7 different grant awards. The HMEP Grant is expected to receive an award of \$133,609 for the upcoming year. The Academy received \$150,000 in federal Department of Labor grant funds to support the VSFA Cadet Academy as a pass-through grant from a Senator Sanders earmark.

The Fire Academy applied for \$500,000 in funding from U.S. Dept of Energy in partnership with Maine and New Hampshire to develop and deliver electric vehicle and infrastructure training over a 3-year period.

The Fire Academy also applied for a \$1 million Congressionally Directed Spending allocation from Senator Sanders focused on apparatus replacement.

In anticipation of a Firefighter I Hybrid delivery in the next fiscal year, the VFA has put together a Hybrid Team of nine instructors who will focus on the virtual content. The Fire Academy plans to add technology packages to adequately support the project. The Fire Academy is attempting to move virtual deliveries to a Zoom platform because we have experienced access issues and functional limitations when using the Teams platform.

The Fire Academy has secured a contract with CTR for the delivery of Rope Rescue Operations, Ice Water Rescue, Surface Water Technician with Boat Operations, and Swiftwater Rescue Technician courses. So far CTR has delivered 1 Surface Water Rescue with Boat Operations courses, 4 additional courses are planned, and 3 have been announced.

The Fire Academy has a contract in place with Strategic Code Solutions for the delivery of Fire Inspector programs over the next two years. A Fire Inspector I/II program has been confirmed with orientation scheduled for August 5th. The Academy is working to schedule a Fire Inspector II following that delivery.

Proposals have been received from outside contractors to deliver training in instructor development, advanced leadership training, strategy and tactics, etc.

There is a Vehicle Rescue Technician hybrid offering underway.

The Fire Academy is working on the planning of an Instructor Development Day/Conference. The date and topics will be announced once arrangements are finalized.

2024 Regional Fire Schools enrollment numbers are rebounding but have not returned to pre-COVID levels.

- i. Addison County: April 20 & 21 (Ventilation) - CANCELLED
- ii. Northeast International Mutual Aid: April 27 & 28 (EVDT)
- iii. Twin State: May 4 & 5 (EVDT) - CANCELLED
- iv. North Country: June 1 & 2 (Flashover)

2024 National Fire Academy Course Offerings

DMICO	Warren	January 6 & 7	21
ISO	Newport	January 20 & 21	15

**Vermont Fire Service Training Council
Minutes of the June 10, 2024 Meeting**

Fire Inv for FR	Middlebury	February 10 & 11	20
Exer Leadership: Difficult Conversations	Williston	February 24 & 25	19
ICS and RM for the Fire Service	Castleton	March 9 & 10	22
PICO	Bennington	March 23 & 24	CANCELLED
Fire Insp Princ II – 6 Day	VFA	June 2 -7	15
Total			112

Three State weekend will be held on June 22 and 23, 2024, and we currently have 21 students registered.

The Fire Academy has scheduled a Command and Control of Fire Department Operations at Target Hazards, 6 – Day Course to be held October 21 – 26, 2024 at the VFA in Pittsford.

The 2025 NFA direct deliveries are:

- Youth Firesetting Intervention Specials F0633 – Vermont Fire Academy, Pittsford - October 19 & 20, 2024 (Confirmed)
- Incident Safety Officer F0729- Caledonia County (Saint Johnsbury Academy) January 18 & 19, 2025
- Leadership Frameworks for Success F0648- Rutland County (Brandon Fire Station) January 25 & 26, 2025
- ICS-Resource Management for the Fire Service F0376 Windham County (Londonderry) February 8 & 9, 2025
- Strategy and Tactics for Initial Company Operations F0455- Grand Isle County (Alburgh) February 22 & 23, 2025
- Shaping the Future (F0602) – Orange County (Thetford) March 8 & 9, 2025
- 6–day New Executive Chief Officer (N0763) – Vermont Fire Academy, Pittsford – March 10 – 15, 2025
- Three State Weekend – Emmitsburg, MD – June 7 and 8, 2025

The Fire Academy has completed an SME review of the curriculum and certification exam instruments for Hazardous Materials Awareness and Operations.

The Fire Academy will begin review of IFSTA Essentials of Firefighting 8th edition upon its release. This text meets the new NFPA 1010 standard for Firefighter. No projected transition date has been established as of yet.

To date, the East Cottage has had 1,172 overnight stays.

The Fire Academy is carefully watching the new proposed 1910.156 Emergency Response rule which is currently in public comment period. There are over two dozen consensus standards being incorporated into the proposed rule. This will have significant impacts on Vermont’s fire departments in the areas of training, operations, financial, and personnel. DPS and VT EMS will be meeting to collaborate on a potential public comment.

Chief Collette asked where the liability is for the Surface Water classes that are being offered. It is discussed that student applications require the department to take liability and students are told

Vermont Fire Service Training Council Minutes of the June 10, 2024 Meeting

they are expected to be able to swim. The contractor is validating swimming skills within the program. Chief Collette also asks what the status of the RFP's are and if interested parties were notified. Chief Skaza will be contacting those who submitted proposals to update them on the progress of the project.

Lt. Spencer asked if cancer screening will only be for Firefighter I students or Firefighter II as well. Chief Skaza says that the proposed bill only specified Firefighter I but believes there may be leeway. Lt. Spencer asked if the Fire Academy knew when the screening will begin. Chief Skaza says that the process still needs more time to work out details and that so far, the screenings are not funded.

Governance Committee Report (John Marcus and Michael Skaza present)

The last meeting was on May 22, 2024. The stormwater reclamation project was reviewed, and work will occur this fall. No capital construction projects except for architectural and mechanical design work in Main Building, includes connection to Town municipal wastewater system. There was a discussion regarding pending major maintenance projects and general BGS service issues.

Hazardous Materials Curriculum Committee (Estey)

Haz Mat Operations curriculum review was concluded. A subject matter expert (SME) committee was put together by the VFA. The committee work was completed. The biggest question facing the committee was if it was appropriate to remove decon from the curriculum, however, after the committee met with the State Haz Mat Chief it was decided that removing decon was not an acceptable change given our current operational model. Next the group focused on updating the curriculum. The SME group updated the lesson plans and edited the international and radiological content. Duplicate and redundant slides were removed which was a charge of the group and further reduction and condensing has been done. Skill sheets were enhanced. There was an analysis and refinement of the test banks to improve the testing instruments.

Discussion on the HMO chart of pass rates, which only includes IFSTA 6th Edition material. There was focus on remediation in this year's classes, work was done to use a better exam instrument, and the Fire Academy thinks it is headed in the right direction. An 88% pass rate is good since some students did not opt to retest.

Chief Collette asks about what happens to HMO students who fail. It is explained that if a student fails HMO they are encouraged to stay in the class and finish what they are able to within the Firefighter I content.

Discussion took place on what the Fire Academy feels is an acceptable pass rate. There is no ideal pass rate. Deputy Commissioner Batsie pointed out that we conduct testing to provide a filter for those who do not possess the knowledge or skills following the training, and that not everyone will meet the bar.

Unfinished Business:

Update on VFSTC Rules (Marcus/Skaza)

Vermont Fire Service Training Council Minutes of the June 10, 2024 Meeting

On February 29, 2024, John Marcus and Chief Skaza attended the LCAR meeting and the revised Council rules were accepted without question and the rules went into effect on March 15, 2024.

New Business:

Apprentice Time and Overtime SOG is operational so it is informational. No questions from the Council.

Instructor Adherence to Curriculum SOG needs endorsement. This SOG allows instructors to customize presentations within reason. If a significant modification needs to be made, then the change needs to be submitted to the full-time staff for consideration.

The motion to endorse was made by Chief Estey and seconded by Moran. Motion passed.

Discussion of the program enrollment and completion handout. This table summarizes the number of enrollees at the start of our programs and the number who certify.

The enrollment to certification ratio for Rope Operations seems off because students receive a certificate of attendance from the contractor and the Fire Academy does not typically see the students who fail the exam return for a retest attempt.

A discussion of the Fire Academy tracking of departures from programs this year and the biggest reason is absenteeism.

Discussion of the program request map for FY25. Four of the requests are in priority counties, Franklin, Windsor, Washington, and a Hybrid offering. Essex County did not make a request so the Fire Academy picked one request from the other non-priority requests. The selected request was for a Firefighter I in Manchester since it was noticed that there were no program offerings in the Southern part of the state. Additionally, Bennington County would have to wait another four or five years to offer a course since the last offering in that county which is not equitable. This is a total of seven programs since the VFA considers combined offerings to be two different programs.

Discussion that the Fire Academy believes that seven is the maximum number of Firefighter programs that can be supported currently given the high number of instructional assignments that had to be covered by full-time staff in FY24.

A motion to endorse the Fire Academy FY25 Firefighter program awards was made by Estey, seconded by Marcus. Motion passed.

Chief Collette comments that the delivery method needs to change. The idea of staff instructors needs to be considered for the Fire Academy to improve delivery in the future. Discussion that instructor pay needs to be increased. Discussion of enfranchising the locals to help certify firefighters. Lt. Spencer encourages the VFA to establish a working group to study instructor recruitment and retention.

**Vermont Fire Service Training Council
Minutes of the June 10, 2024 Meeting**

Currently, in combined level testing, there are three options. These options are to either take one combined level test at the end of the program or take the Firefighter I level test at the end of the Firefighter I content, and then take the Firefighter II level test at the end of the program. Three exams have been an administrative snare and confusing for students. The Fire Academy wants to test level I and level II separately, and no longer offer a combined exam. Lt. Spencer stated that after instructing a combined level program, he feels that this would be an improvement.

Motion made by Estey to accept and seconded by Spencer. Motion carries.

Coalition Report: (Skaza)

The coalition had a solid presence in the Statehouse and was very busy this year. The Coalition hosted a coffee and pastry event in the Statehouse which was well attended.

Vermont Career Chiefs: (Collette)

The Career Chiefs met in May and discussed that the hiring pool is limited and that the volunteer fire service is the feeder program into the career departments. EMS is a requisite requirement for hiring. Since the discussion, there has been a working group created to discuss a recruit school for the Career Fire Service. There have been discussions of how to incentivize the career folks to join the Fire Academy staff.

Vermont State Firefighters Association: (Estey)

The Cadet Academy will be July 7 - 14. The Convention will be in Middlebury on July 26 and 27, 2024. VSFA is trying to incentivize and find new firefighters as well.

Vermont Fire Chiefs: (Skip Bothfield)

Absent

Professional Firefighters of Vermont: (Spencer)

Chris Dubie was re-elected as the President. Lt. Spencer is actively trying to recruit VFA instructors and posting flyers with his union members.

Agency of Natural Resources: (Healy)

Seven wildland stand-alone courses were completed. They have been very busy with wildland fires this year.

Department of Education: (Absent)

Absent

Department of Health: (Moran)

Departed meeting prior to reports.

Department of Labor: (Absent)

Quick take bulletins may be helpful and will be sent to Chief Skaza to send out to the other members of the Council. A formal comment was submitted by the Occupational Safety and Health State Plan Association regarding the new changes which question why OSHA is promulgating rules that will not be enforced by them but instead be handled at the State level.

**Vermont Fire Service Training Council
Minutes of the June 10, 2024 Meeting**

Dan encourages the VFA to submit comments on the proposed rules. He indicated that the rule most likely won't look like it looks now. Dan is willing to meet with interested groups regarding the change.

Vermont Domestic Insurance: (Miles)

No report.

General Public: (Marcus)

No report.

The next meeting is scheduled for October 3, 2024, at 10:00 a.m. and will be held at the Vermont Fire Academy in Pittsford.

Motion made by Chief Estey to adjourn the meeting, seconded by Spencer. The motion passed unanimously.

DRAFT