

# 11/12/20 Municipal & First Responder Call Notes

## I. **Welcome and Introduction:** VEM Director Erica Bornemann

- Welcome participants on the call.
  - This is the weekly call for first responders, EMDs, RPCs, and municipal officials. For the past few months, this call has been every other week, but will now return to a weekly schedule.
  - The next call will be on Thursday, November 19<sup>th</sup> at 2PM. The invitation will go out on Monday, November 16<sup>th</sup>.
  - The meeting invitations include a link to a survey we use to guide our talking points. The survey will only capture one question per response. To ask multiple questions, fill out the survey multiple times. The survey link will not change week to week.
  - On today's call we will hear from myself, Department of Public Safety Commissioner Michael Schirling, and DEPRIP Director Dan Batsie. In addition, we have Capt. Mike Manley from the Vermont State Police and Chief Peter Lynch from the Vermont Fire Academy available to answer questions. We will be providing you all an overview of the State's response to COVID-19 and we will have time for additional questions at the end of the call.
  - FAQs will be updated as needed and can be found at: <https://vem.vermont.gov/coronavirus>
  - From this site you can also click on the "[Call Notes](#)" section on the left-hand side where we will post notes from this call. It will be added to the list of First Responder Notes.
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## II. **Department of Public Safety Update:** Commissioner Michael Schirling

- Cases of COVID-19 are increasing in Vermont, but not as quickly as they are nationally. We are increasingly concerned about viral spread and a rise in hospitalizations.
  - The State is re-deploying field hospitals in Essex Junction and Rutland.
  - We need to reemphasize first responder safety. The peak in infections last spring was mostly at long-term care facilities and other more contained communities – our current surge in infections is more widespread (though centering on Washington County). This impacts public safety operations and the state workforce. Now is the time for increased vigilance.
  - Compliance checks start tomorrow, as will be detailed later by Director Bornemann. Local and county law enforcement are invited to join in those efforts if they have the time.
  - Starting next week, COVID-19 safety cards, outlining travel guidance and safety information, will be distributed during traffic stops and at the Burlington Airport.
  - We should anticipate alterations to Vermont's safety posture – not a return to lockdown, rather more surgical measures. Alterations are coming as part of a concerted effort to contain viral spread. There is concern among national modelers and state government about the current trajectory of COVID-19.
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## III. **COVID-19 Overview/VDH Comments:** HOC Incident Commander and DEPRIP Director Dan Batsie

- Overall update on COVID-19 in Vermont
  - 109 cases of COVID-19 were reported in Vermont for yesterday, the highest single-day number yet. There have been 349 cases in the past week and 776 cases in the past 30 days. November is shaping up to be one of the highest months, in terms of new cases. Last week, Vermont recorded its first death associated with COVID-19 since July.

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- As a point of comparison, last night South Dakota (which has a comparable population and population density to Vermont) recorded a daily new case total of 1,200 cases. So we're seeing an uptick, and that's not a good thing, but Vermont is comparatively still okay.
- Along with rising cases, there is a concurrent uptick in hospitalizations. The more cases of COVID-19 there are, the more hospitalizations, critical patients, and maybe deaths there will be.
- COVID-19 mitigation guidance is being expanded and changed in a surgical way to address the rise in transmission.
- A COVID-19 vaccine is on its way. The state is standing up the infrastructure needed to distribute and administer the vaccine.
- The ultimate takeaway is that now is not the time to let fatigue or wishful thinking get in the way of protecting yourself, in either your professional or personal life.
- Outbreaks and situations
  - The Department of Health's Epidemiological Branch is shouldering a massive amount of work. There are currently 18 COVID-19 outbreaks (15 primary and 3 secondary) and 79 situations (which are usually just 1 positive case, but with the potential for exposures, such as at a school or worksite).
  - 71% of cases in outbreaks are related to private parties or gatherings, demonstrating that we all play a role in limiting viral spread. I ask you all to be vigilant; limit gatherings and exposures.
- Testing and tracing efforts
  - The Department of Health is doing a lot to address the rise in COVID-19 cases. Contact tracing efforts are being expanded, with increased staff including National Guard personnel. There are upwards of 20-30 contacts for each positive COVID-19 case, resulting in a significant amount of labor. Contact tracing keeps viral spread from getting worse.
  - If you are a contact, get tested early for COVID-19. A test before the 7-day mark of quarantine won't get you out of quarantine, but it helps gather more information about other potential contacts and viral spread.
  - If you went to a gathering within the past couple of weeks, get tested for COVID-19.
  - The Department of Health plans on expanding access to COVID-19 testing, with some new initiatives soon to be unveiled. The goal is to have testing available within 30 minutes driving time of every Vermonter 7 days a week, and not just during business hours.
  - We received a question regarding guidance on when and if testing is recommended for individuals who may have been exposed, are asymptomatic, and are quarantined. The question was around inconsistent guidance on who should be tested if exposed and asymptomatic, and what EMDs should be telling folks in this situation.
    - The State aims to have testing available to all who want or need it. While healthcare providers may not refer asymptomatic individuals to testing, those who want to get tested can always go directly to the [Department of Health website and schedule a test](#) without going through their healthcare provider.
  - We received a question about how local officials can get information about COVID-19 cases in their jurisdictions, and how to respond when they hear about cases "through the grapevine."
    - While the Department of Health reports positive cases by county on the [COVID-19 Data Dashboard](#), it's almost impossible to breakout data by town while maintaining confidentiality. There is a real threat of identifying a patient if daily town-by-town data is reported, which both runs afoul of HIPAA and other privacy statutes while also potentially stigmatizing the individual.
    - Health guidance does not change based on the number of infections in a town – at this point, assume everyone outside your household is infected.

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- EMS updates
    - There are resources for COVID-19 funding on the [Office of EMS website](#), as well as a webinar on the topic.
    - The [EMS tuition voucher](#) program is going well. If you still want to participate, get the application in soon. The program provides tuition vouchers to students actively affiliated with a Vermont EMS agency enrolling in a Vermont-approved EMS course (EMR, EMT, AEMT, paramedic) before December 31.
    - The Office of EMS is in the process of allocating an **EMS agency stabilization grant program** established by the state legislature to offset lost revenue from reduced EMS call volumes in the spring. We determined that 50 Vermont EMS agencies lost call volume due to COVID-19 during this timeframe, and reached out to all of them with information about the grant. If you represent one of those agencies, please confirm your participation and submit a W-9 form, so the contract can be completed and the funding can be transferred. If you did not receive a notification about this grant program but think you should have, please reach out to the Office of EMS.
    - The Office of EMS is finalizing **workforce stabilization grants**, which will provide money to licensed EMS providers who were working during the pandemic. There should be an announcement about this program by next week. We've identified how to identify eligible providers and distribute the funds; EMS agencies will submit their active rosters for March through September, and the Office of EMS will provide the agency a sum of money to disburse to its providers. Please keep in mind that there are tax implications of this program.
    - The Office of EMS is working with the CPA firm McSoley and McCoy to offer support to EMS agencies with grants and tax paperwork. More information soon.
    - Recent and upcoming health guidance will impact first responder trainings and meetings. The Division of Fire Safety is updating its non-emergency gathering guidance and education guidance to match what's announced by the governor.
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### IV. SEOC Overview/VEM Comments: VEM Director Erica Bornemann

- **SEOC status:** The SEOC remains activated every weekday from 0800 until 1600. On the weekends, the SEOC is in monitoring status, meaning the watch officer is the point of contact for any resource needs that arise. The SEOC is entirely virtual.
  - On Monday, the SEOC is switching its online management platform from DLAN to WebEOC, with some accompanying name changes. But the people staffing the SEOC and the organizational structure will remain largely the same.
- **Recent policy updates:**
  - **Gathering size advisory:** On November 6<sup>th</sup>, Governor Scott and Health Commissioner Mark Levine issued an [advisory on social gathering size](#), strongly recommending they be limited to 10 or fewer people and with a very limited number of trusted households. As the state and the North East region see an increasing number of cases as a result of private social gatherings, the Governor is providing firm recommendations to limit these types of events.
  - There were several updates announced at the Governor's press conference on Tuesday the 10<sup>th</sup>:
    - **Suspended travel map:** Governor Scott announced a [suspension of the travel map](#) that requires people traveling from certain counties with high COVID-19 caseloads to quarantine. Vermont is now requiring a 14-day quarantine for every person coming to Vermont, or back to Vermont, for nonessential travel, regardless of which county they are traveling from. This change does not

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impact those traveling to Vermont for essential purposes. The quarantine can be cut in half, to seven days, if the person tests negative for COVID-19. This new measure is meant to combat the spread of COVID-19 as we see a surge of new cases and multiple outbreaks spreading across the state.

- **Teacher testing:** Health Commissioner Mark Levine announced that the State will offer COVID-19 surveillance testing to teachers and staff at all public school districts and select large independent schools. The Agency of Education will be working directly with superintendents to implement this testing, and superintendents will be the primary authority for implementing this testing in their districts. These tests will be voluntary for individual teachers and staff. Teachers and staff will need to sign up for testing through a Health Department registration form, and if they wish to opt out they can simply decline to complete the form. Testing will be offered to all school staff next week. Afterward, for each week in the month of December, 25% of districts will be tested, according to a schedule that ensures geographic diversity each week.
  - **Compliance checks:** DPS Commissioner Schirling announced an increase in outreach and education to assess and encourage compliance with the public health guidance. The Vermont State Police, Division of Fire Safety, and Department of Liquor and Lottery will resume compliance assessments and educational efforts at lodging facilities, bars, and restaurants. The Department of Public Safety will also distribute COVID-19 safety cards during traffic stops to help inform drivers of the travel policy and other safety protocols. The Department of Fish and Wildlife is conducting outreach to hunters to ensure they understand the updated travel policy and gathering advisory.
  - **Interstate hockey suspension:** Just this morning, Governor Scott, along with the governors of Massachusetts, Connecticut, Maine, New Jersey, Rhode Island, and New Hampshire, [agreed to suspend interstate competitions](#) for school and youth hockey from November 14<sup>th</sup> through at least the end of the year. This suspension does not apply to collegiate or professional teams.
  - More measures will be announced in coming days, in response to the increasing prevalence of COVID-19 in Vermont and regionally. All of these changes are about maintaining public health and the integrity of healthcare system.
- **SEOC active missions that have been progressing this week:**
    - We're re-activating alternate care sites:
      - A northern alternate care facility at the Champlain Valley Exposition in Essex Junction has an overall capacity of 400 beds, with most being warehoused by the Vermont National Guard since late spring. That site has remained staged with 50 beds through the summer. 100 additional beds will be deployed in the days to come, with 250 additional beds and other components in reserve.
      - A 50-bed field hospital trailer is staged in southern Vermont near Rutland, so that southern facility remains ready to add another 50 beds for a potential surge.
      - Teams from the Vermont National Guard will carry out the mission to deploy these assets as the State preemptively prepares for impacts related to rising case levels.
    - The Farmers-to-Families food box program, run by the Vermont Foodbank, will be extended through December 31st. The USDA awarded Lancaster Foods, a Maryland company, the contract for Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine. Vermont has been allocated 17,906 boxes of food for this round of distribution; each box will have 32 pounds of food. Distributions are anticipated to resume the week of

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November 16<sup>th</sup>. The first two weeks of reservations are available online at [www.dhr.vermont.gov/food-help](http://www.dhr.vermont.gov/food-help).

- The SEOC continues to support vaccine planning and is working on planning efforts for receipt and distribution of a vaccine.
  - The SEOC and the Fire Academy sent out a survey at noon today to the entire fire service to gather information on membership from all Departments. This is a preparatory action that goes along with vaccine planning because first responders are in phase 1A for vaccine distribution. We are not sure if we will need this information (it depends on the enrollment of providers for vaccine distribution), but we want to make sure we capture membership information so we can be ready for vaccine distribution if needed.
    - For the fire service, this survey only went out to Fire Chiefs. DFS may send it to a wider audience and will make that decision based on the initial response to the survey.
    - The VSP also sent out a survey to gather this information from Law Enforcement agencies, and the EMS office sent out a survey for EMS agencies.
  - **PPE Requests:** We would like to remind you that PPE requests to the state should only be for emergent needs. There are [documents on the VDH website](#) for conservation measures, strategies for conserving scarce resources, equipment guidance, and other tools.
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### V. Questions from Call Participants

- The compliance checks mentioned by Commissioner Schirling and Director Bornemann are a partnership between various agencies, and are primarily a mode of educational outreach to ensure understanding of Vermont's COVID-19 policies.
- We do not yet know how COVID-19 vaccinations will impact the masking mandate. Hopefully within the next year, the masking mandate can be dropped, but that is a ways down the road.
- It is the governor's decision whether to return to a stricter lockdown. Those decisions are being informed by the data and the science.
- There are more conversations to be had about whether the surveillance testing for teachers could also be available to first responders. We will follow the guidance of the Department of Health epidemiological team.
- The [county](#) and [town](#) breakdowns on the Department of Health's dashboard are about as detailed as the State can go with the specifics of COVID-19 cases. If there is an outbreak or a threat to critical infrastructure that warrants a change in guidance or municipal action, the Department of Health will reach out to the town and other local organizations. This was the approach taken in Winooksi over the summer, where local partners were invaluable at organizing resources and messaging.
  - Not every case nor even every outbreak warrants pop-up testing or other such interventions. Testing is not a panacea, and may be a misuse of resources.
  - Local officials concerned about a particular situation should reach out to the Department of Health.
- There are so many different types of masks and facial coverings that it's hard to provide good guidance on what types are preferable. Masks with exhale valves are less protective of those around you. The Joint Information Center will look into possible messaging on this topic.
- Critical infrastructure workers, including water treatment and wastewater workers, are part of the conversation of who should be prioritized for COVID-19 vaccination.

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- Vermonters should not mix households at deer camps. We understand that hunting is a longstanding tradition and we've already been asked to sacrifice a lot, but please take the latest guidance into account.
  - The Agency of Natural Resources website has information on [how hunting is impacted by COVID-19 guidance](#). The Fish and Wildlife Department also has a [COVID-19 information page for hunters](#).
  - There are still ways to hunt safely, if general rules are followed.
- For the latest demographic information on those infected with COVID-19 in Vermont, visit the Department of Health's [data dashboard](#).
- The Alternate Care Site locations in Vermont were decided by considering many factors, such as the ventilation and space in available facilities, transfer infrastructure, and predictive modeling of patient needs. At this time, Essex Junction and Rutland are the two sites being set up, but the State will follow the modeling as appropriate.
- Director Bornemann will reach out to the Watch Officers about including county COVID-19 counts in morning briefings.