

12/23/20 Municipal & First Responder Call Notes

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

- This is the weekly call for first responders, EMDs, RPCs, and municipal officials.
- The next call will be on Wednesday, December 30th at 3pm, a change in both date and time. The invitation will go out on Monday, December 28th. In January, we will return to our normal Thursday schedule.
- Today's call will start with an update from the National Weather Service on the possibility for flooding on Thursday and Friday.
- 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 representatives from the National Weather Service, DEPRIP Director Dan Batsie, and Fire Academy Chief Pete Lynch. In addition, we have Vermont State Police Captain Mike Manley and Vermont League of Cities and Towns Public Policy and Advocacy Director Karen Horn 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.

AGENDA:

- I. **Intro/call format**
- II. **Winter storm update**
- III. **COVID-19/VDH overview**
- IV. **SEOC overview/VEM comments**
- V. **DFS Comments**
- VI. **Q&A with participants**

II. **Winter Storm Update:** VEM Director Erica Bornemann & National Weather Service (NWS)

- [NWS Burlington Office](#) (responsible for central and northern Vermont):
 - The storm system will begin as rain Thursday night into Friday morning. The highest rain totals will be in the south of the state, specifically the southeast slopes of the Green Mountains.
 - The two greatest risks are 1) minor to moderate river flooding and 2) melting snowpack.
 - Otter creek in Rutland is of particular risk for flooding.
 - The other concern is wind, with gusts from 25-45mph, up to 50mph in the Champlain Valley.
- [NWS Albany Office](#) (responsible for southern Vermont):
 - This will mostly be a heavy rain event from late tomorrow afternoon and evening into Friday morning. Rain totals could be up to 2 inches, especially in the higher peaks of the southern Green Mountains.
 - The heaviest rain will end midmorning to midday Friday.
 - There will also be strong winds, especially again at higher elevations. There could be wind gusts in excess of 50mph for a good part of Thursday night into Friday morning. Winds should die down Friday morning, slowing to 20-30mph by midday.
 - Considerable snowmelt adds to the threat of flooding. Much if not all of the snow in southern Vermont may melt as temperatures rise above 50 in lower elevations.
 - Temperatures will climb into the 50s early Thursday afternoon, and will continue to warm through the night.
 - Snow melt is the toughest variable to predict.
 - There is an elevated flood threat for all of southern Vermont
 - Walloomsac River in Bennington County could experience major flooding on Friday.

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- After the storm passes on Friday, temperatures will fall and conditions will dry before freezing Friday night. The cooling will be gradual enough that flash freezing is unlikely.
 - SEOC posture:
 - The SEOC is planning and preparing for any state action needed in response to this storm and has prepared staff availability rosters in the event an activation is required on Christmas eve, Christmas day or the early part of the weekend. The Vermont Emergency Management Watch Officer is also available 24/7 to respond to calls for assistance.
 - The SEOC is working with state agencies, the Urban Search and Rescue Team, and swift water teams to ensure they're ready to deploy if needed.
 - VEM put out a [press release on the storm](#) today, available on social media and the VEM website, that can be used by localities in their own outreach.
 - Cities and towns should prepare now and notify the public that flash flooding could be an issue.
 - Storm-related questions
 - There have been some inconsistencies in forecasts, especially rain totals. Later briefings from both the Albany and Burlington offices will clarify.
 - The Burlington Office expects that flooding along the Mad River will be no more than moderate, due to the reduced snowpack in the area.
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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
 - New daily case counts have been in the high 60s and low 70s over the past four days, which is below peaks seen in the past couple of weeks. This plateauing is a good sign.
 - The test positivity rate is currently 2.1%. There have been 2,966 cases of COVID-19 reported in Vermont in the last 30 days.
 - Deaths associated with COVID-19 in Vermont are more frequent now. Overall, there have been 117 deaths, including 12 in the last week and 54 in the last 30 days. Most recent deaths resulted from COVID-19 outbreaks in long-term care facilities, underscoring the vulnerability of that population.
 - Vermont has also seen an uptick in COVID-19 hospitalizations. There are currently 35 people hospitalized, including 9 in intensive care and 1 on a ventilator.
- The Department of Health identified 23 new situations/outbreaks yesterday, at schools, businesses, long-term care facilities, etc. The Department is putting forth a tremendous effort to contain these situations.
- First responder surveillance testing:
 - First responders can always access testing through the publicly available routes. The State runs 15-18 local testing centers each day, though many will be closed for one or two days over Christmas.
 - In addition, starting mid-January, each site will set aside some time each week for first responder walk-ins. This change will be posted and announced in early January.
 - Arranging first responder testing in Chittenden County is particularly hard because of the overall high demand for testing there. So the State is looking to set aside one day a month for first responder-only testing. The first such day will likely be scheduled in the third week of January.
 - The State also has an integrated rapid response mechanism for first response agencies suffering from emergent staffing shortages due to COVID-19 exposures. The response can include epidemiological guidance and testing. To activate this resource, call the Watch Officer at 800-347-0488.

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- Vaccination updates
 - Vaccinations of priority phase 1a populations (at-risk healthcare workers and long-term care facility residents) continues. Phase 1a will likely last another couple weeks.
 - Hospitals are responsible for organizing the vaccination of their staff and nearby healthcare workers, including EMS providers. The Department of Health gave each hospital a list of nearby EMS agencies it is responsible for. Any EMS agency that doesn't know when and how their staff will be vaccinated should reach out to the Vermont Office of EMS.
 - Which populations will comprise priority phase 1b is still being decided. Vermont's advisory committee met today, but decided another meeting is needed next week.
 - The Department of Health is working with EMS agencies to create a personnel pool to help administer vaccines. Contracts should go out late this week or early next week.
 - Dr. Daniel Wolfson just finished creating a training program for EMTs to administer vaccines. An update on that should be available tomorrow or early next week.
 - The ability of EMTs to administer the vaccine means more EMS agencies are eligible to assist with vaccinations. The Office of EMS will reopen the contract application period if more agencies want to join.
 - The Department of Health is still figuring out how EMS providers will fit into the broader staffing plan.
 - EMS updates
 - Some work on the workforce stabilization grant program continues. The Commissioner drafted a memo to answer questions about the contracts.
 - Will Moran starts as the Vermont EMS Chief on Monday. He will be a welcome addition to the team.
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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, Christmas, and New Year's Day, 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.
- **Recent policy updates:**
 - At yesterday's press conference, Governor Scott announced a small, temporary [modification to restrictions](#) on multi-household gatherings during the holidays. Between December 23 and January 2, households may gather with one other trusted household. State officials stress that, while gathering with one other household is allowed, anyone over the age of 65, those with pre-existing conditions, and those who work with vulnerable populations should still avoid gatherings.
 - It is strongly recommended that everyone who participates in a multi-household gathering be tested seven days after the gathering.
 - If a Vermont household gathers with a trusted household from outside of Vermont, all participants from both households must quarantine for seven days followed by a negative test (or a 14-day quarantine) after the gathering.
 - The epidemiological impact of this temporary modification will inform later changes to gathering guidance.

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- Governor Scott also announced youth sports may resume with no-contact practices and Vermonters may resume outdoor activities with those outside their household, as long as physical distancing, masking, and other precautions are observed.
 - The rest of Vermont's COVID-19 guidance remains in place:
 - Adult recreational sports and spectators at sporting events remain suspended.
 - The [cross-state travel policy](#) remains in place and anyone traveling to Vermont must follow the quarantine requirements.
 - On Monday, a new federal \$900 billion coronavirus assistance relief bill passed both the House and the Senate, and is awaiting presidential signature.
 - At Tuesday's press conference, Representative Welch said it is not yet known how much money will go to Vermont, but he was confident that the state will get its fair share.
 - This bill will extend how long states have to spend Coronavirus Relief Funds (CRF). VEM's consultants are currently reviewing the new legislation in detail to determine how funding to specific areas in the new package will enable us to adjust the allocation of unexpended CRF funds.
 - However, no additional direct funding for municipalities is anticipated.
 - The Local Government Expense Reimbursement (LGER) program won't be impacted by the legislation, unless the state legislature opts to create a similar program.
 - FEMA-eligible costs (e.g. PPE for dealing with COVID-positive individuals) can continue to be submitted to FEMA through the Grants Portal at any time.
 - **SEOC active missions that have been progressing this week:**
 - Vaccine distribution updates
 - The Department of Health posted a [COVID-19 vaccine data dashboard](#) on their website, with breakdowns by county, sex, race, ethnicity, and age. It will be updated every Wednesday.
 - Hospitals continue to vaccinate their staff and nearby high-risk health workers, including EMS providers, in Phase 1a of vaccine distribution.
 - The other part of Phase 1a, a partnership between the federal government and private pharmacies to vaccinate long-term care facility residents and staff, started on Monday.
 - Emergency service organizations with service interruptions due to COVID-19 should reach out to the SEOC. Our Safety and Security Branch is focused on helping with exactly these sorts of requests. The SEOC can be reached 24/7 at: 800-347-0488.
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V. Division of Fire Safety: Fire Academy Chief Pete Lynch

- The Division of Fire Safety conducts the Vermont fire service capability survey every two weeks and submits the results to the SEOC. The data comes from [points of contact in each county](#), who are responsible for gathering information from all the departments in their county. The latest survey was collected on December 21st.
 - 33% of counties reported challenges with responder availability due to COVID-19 concerns (e.g., exposures, quarantines).
 - All departments are operating normally or with minor adjustments. Mutual aid is functioning as normal.
 - 58% of counties reported responders were exposed to COVID-19 within the last 2 weeks. These have been small situations, not outbreaks.

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- No departments are reporting needs for extra resources. One county requested PPE recently, and that request was fulfilled.
 - COVID-19 is more widespread than in the past. Wear your PPE and be vigilant both during emergencies and normal life.
 - Remember that the deadline for firefighter recertifications was pushed back from December to June.
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VI. Questions from Call Participants

- In the fire service capability survey, interaction with a COVID-19 patient doesn't count as an exposure if proper PPE is worn. Departments that list these interactions for the survey should clarify using the comment section.
- Representatives from the Department of Health will look into reports that a fire department that doesn't perform EMS services was included in Phase 1a of COVID-19 vaccinations. Phase 1a is for EMS-licensed first responders only. Firefighters without EMS certifications will likely be in Phase 1b. Everyone in state leadership agrees that firefighters are essential, it's just a question of where they fit in amongst other high-risk groups.
- The Vermont League of Cities and Towns is working with the state legislature to determine if an extension of the deadline for municipalities to spend funds from the Local Government Expense Reimbursement (LGER) program is allowable.