

2/25/21 Municipal & First Responder Call Notes

I. **Welcome and Introduction:** DPS Deputy Commissioner Chris Herrick

- Welcome participants on the call.
- This is the weekly call for first responders, EMDs, RPCs, and municipal officials.
- The next call will be on Thursday, March 4th at 2pm. The invitation will go out on Monday, March 1st.
- 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 DEPRIP Director Dan Batsie and Fire Academy Chief Pete Lynch. In addition, we have Vermont League of Cities and Towns Public Policy and Advocacy Director Karen Horn and Vermont State Police Captain Mike Manley 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 page 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. **COVID-19/VDH overview**
- III. **SEOC overview/VEM comments**
- IV. **Division of Fire Safety comments**
- V. **Q&A with participants**

II. **COVID-19 Overview/VDH Comments:** HOC Incident Commander and DEPRIP Director Dan Batsie

- **Overall update on COVID-19 in Vermont**
 - There have been 691 cases of COVID-19 reported in Vermont in the last week, which is significantly fewer than a month ago.
 - The 7-day average test positivity rate is 1.6%, which is also down from a month ago when it was 2.3%.
 - There have been 8 deaths from COVID-19 in Vermont in the last week, and 32 in the last 30 days. The death rate is higher than it was in the beginning of the pandemic, but has been stable over the last few weeks.
 - 27 Vermonters are currently hospitalized with COVID-19, down from 43 last week and 53 the week prior. Of those currently hospitalized, 10 are in intensive care and 3 are on ventilators.
 - More Vermont COVID-19 statistics are available on the [Department of Health website](#).
- **Testing/tracing updates**
 - The Department of Health Epidemiological Branch is currently tracking 86 outbreaks throughout the state, many in workplaces.
 - The Department of Health is maintaining its COVID-19 testing capability. There are still times set aside for first responders at many testing sites.
 - Vermont Emergency Management's Watch Officer is available 24/7 to help first response agencies with issues around COVID-19 exposures that threaten operations.
- **Vaccination updates**
 - Vermont is well into the process of vaccinating its population against COVID-19.
 - The Department of Health is arranging vaccination for the last folks eligible under phase 1a: long-term care facility residents and healthcare providers, including first responders.

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- COVID-19 vaccination registration is currently open to Vermonters aged 70 and above. On Monday, it will [expand](#) to include Vermonters aged 65 and above. Younger Vermonters with [certain high-risk health conditions](#) will be the next group to be eligible, in the coming weeks.
- Statistics on the progress of Vermont's COVID-19 vaccination campaign is on the [Department of Health website](#).
- The Department of Health recently brought in new pharmacy and healthcare partners to help distribute vaccines, including federally qualified health centers. Vermont's vaccination capacity continues to grow.
- Vermont also has increased capacity to deliver at-home vaccinations to homebound individuals in every county, mostly due to the efforts of the state's EMS agencies. By the end of the week, over 1,500 people will have received at-home vaccinations.
 - To identify eligible homebound individuals, the Department of Health is working with hospitals and primary care providers.
 - If those of you in local government know of homebound individuals who need at-home vaccination, email Dan Batsie.
 - We need to separate those who need at-home vaccination from those who would simply appreciate the convenience. If someone is able to get to other appointments, then they're not truly homebound and we can assist them with transportation to a vaccine clinic. People unable to get to other appointments are the ones eligible for at-home vaccination.
- We received a question on whether the water sector is involved in conversations about which essential workers may be eligible for vaccines after the elderly and those with high-risk conditions.
 - Governor Scott is taking a hard look at the population and what we know about how to save lives from COVID-19. I can't say what the categories will be beyond the age bands and those with high-risk conditions – I don't want to try to guess what the governor will decide.
- We received a question on why vaccinated individuals don't have to quarantine when the effect of the vaccine on transmission is still unknown.
 - We do know that COVID-19 vaccines decrease the transmission of COVID-19, but we don't know if they fully stop it. Until there's more data, there is a chance of some transmission, which is why we're cautious.
 - At the same time, quarantine has a cost. The benefit of getting people out of quarantine outweighs the risk.
- **EMS updates**
 - We received another question on the resumption of fire/EMS non-emergency activities.
 - The [current guidance allows for training](#); there's nothing stopping agencies from conducting training. Current restrictions reflect the governor's orders and the best science we have.
 - Training should be conducted virtually whenever possible. If training must be in person, it should be in groups of fewer than 10 people, socially distanced, and with appropriate PPE.
 - Even though the governor updated guidance last week to allow vaccinated individuals to gather with one other household, that doesn't impact fire/EMS guidance because training involves people from many households.
 - There's recent [CDC guidance](#) that fully vaccinated individuals do not need to quarantine following an exposure to COVID-19. However, vaccinated healthcare providers (including EMS providers) should still not be in a healthcare setting following an exposure. Non-healthcare workers (including police and firefighters) can still go to work following an exposure.
- We received a question about how the State reviews its public health restrictions, and how local government and the public can participate in that process.
 - Three strategies guide Vermont's COVID-19 mitigation measures:

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- 1) Saving lives through stopping the spread of infections, which is the most important strategy.
 - 2) Keeping children in school, which impacts not just academics but also school lunch programs, socialization, and development.
 - 3) Protecting the economy, to ensure the state can continue to function.
 - These strategies have been in place since the beginning of the state's COVID-19 response.
 - Sometimes decisions are easy, because there is a lot of available data to support them. However with COVID-19 there often isn't that much data, in which case policymakers must be thoughtful and reach out to stakeholders to make good decisions. The decisions cannot always be the most popular, but the State tries to have them be in the best interest of the public good.
 - Being on this call is already a good way to participate in the policymaking process. On a weekly basis we return to the Department of Health and the SEOC with questions and new ideas. Dan Batsie discusses the contents of this call with Department of Health Commissioner Mark Levine and State Epidemiologist Patsy Kelso.
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III. SEOC Overview/VEM Comments: DPS Deputy Commissioner Chris Herrick

- **SEOC status:** The SEOC remains activated every weekday from 0800 until 1600. On 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.
 - **There are three recent COVID-19 policy changes, all related to vaccination:**
 - On Friday, Governor Scott announced that [Vermont's travel quarantine policy](#) no longer applies to fully vaccinated individuals.
 - On Tuesday, Governor Scott announced that [fully vaccinated individuals can gather with one other household](#) at a time, regardless of the vaccination status of that household.
 - Yesterday, the Department of Disabilities, Aging, and Independent Living published [guidance](#) encouraging long-term care facilities to loosen visitation and congregate activity policies based on the vaccination status of their residents.
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IV. Division of Fire Safety: Fire Academy Chief Pete Lynch

- The Division of Fire Safety conducted its statewide fire capabilities survey this week (it is now conducted once every three weeks). The metrics in the survey continue to trend favorably.
 - No counties reported challenges with responder availability, and all are operating normally with automatic mutual aid.
 - 31% of counties reported minor adjustments to operations, while the rest reported no change.
 - 31% of counties reported having responders exposed to COVID-19, which is a decrease from the last survey. All personnel exposures appear to be small situations resulting from community spread, as opposed to outbreaks.
 - No reporting counties have a need for further resources or anticipate resource needs in the near future.
 - The survey identified four counties with eligible firefighters interested in COVID-19 vaccination who have yet to receive their first dose. There are only a few people in this category, and the Division of Fire Safety is connecting them to vaccination opportunities.

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- Reiterating what Dan Batsie said, it remains important to conduct fire/EMS training safely. Training should be virtual if possible. When training must be in person, it should be in groups with fewer than 10 people, with masking and distancing. More information is available on the [Division of Fire Safety website](#).
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V. Questions from Call Participants

- Vermont's COVID-19 death rate remains elevated because the rate, in many cases, reflects long-term infections and ongoing outbreaks. Although Vermont's numbers have improved, patients infected weeks ago fight the illness and unfortunately pass away much later. This reflects a lag between initial infection and more recent improvement.
- Vaccinated healthcare providers who are exposed to COVID-19 still need to be excluded from working in health care for 14 days (or 7 days with a negative test), but they do not need to quarantine (e.g., they can go to the grocery store).