

**STATE OF VERMONT
ENHANCED 911 BOARD**

FINAL
approved as written
approval date: 10/19/21

Special Meeting #1 – 23 September 2021

Location: Capitol Plaza Hotel (Montpelier, VT, Room #338) and via Microsoft Teams

10:31 AM – Call to Order

Chair Marcoux brought the meeting to order. The following were in attendance:

Board Members Present

Sheriff Roger Marcoux, Chair
Chief Steven Locke, Vice-Chair
Jerome Pettinga
Brian Keefe
Kelly Kennedy (arrived after roll call)

Staff Members Present

Barbara Neal, Executive Director
Soni Johnson, Board Clerk

Others Present

Scott Smith, Hartford PSAP Administrator
Chief Maurice Lamothe, Saint Albans City PD
Comm. Michael Schirling, Dept. of Pub. Safety
Brad Vail, Interim Chief, Hartford PD
Robert Schlacter

Capt. Lance Burnham (left the meeting at 11:03 AM)

Note: All attendees, except the Board Clerk, attended the meeting via TEAMS.

PSAP Staffing Issue

Executive Director Neal provided an overview of staffing shortages impacting VT PSAPs. A copy of *Staffing Shortages in Vermont Public Safety Answering Points (PSAPs) – Issues and Impacts* has been incorporated into these meeting minutes.

Captain Burnham provided an update on the staffing issues at both the Williston & Westminster PSAPs. The Department of Public Safety (DPS) is actively recruiting to fill vacancies – space for training is an issue as is the time it takes to train for both call-taking and dispatching. DPS currently dispatches for 100+ agencies and staffing shortages are making it difficult to cover both dispatching and call-taking needs. One possible short-term solution being discussed is to hire new staff and train them as 911 call-takers only, with dispatch training occurring in the future.

Discussion

- Both short-term and long-term solutions are needed.
- Need for dedicated 911 call-taker positions (only take 911 calls and don't handle dispatch).
- Dedicated 911 call-takers can handle more 911 calls than a call-taker handling both call-taking and dispatch.
- Can DPS try to bring back retired call-takers to work while new hires are being trained?
- If any of the regional PSAPs have enough staff and flexibility, could they assign someone as a dedicated 911 call-taker during the busiest hours?
- Are more PSAPs needed?
- Should some 911 call-taker workstations be moved from DPS PSAPs to regional PSAPs if the regionals can assign staff as dedicated 911 call-takers?
- Staff stress is an issue – longer hours and staff shortages just increase the issue.
- Does the Board need to change primary call catchment areas?
- Are PSAP reimbursement funds available to help regional PSAPs cover the costs of adding dedicated 911 call-taker positions?
- Does the Board need to change how PSAP reimbursement payments are calculated in future fiscal years (possibly add provision for dedicated 911 call-taking)?
- Both members of the E911 Board Training & Communications (TAC) Department are certified 911 call-takers. They could log in during peak hours to assist in answering DPS PSAP calls.

Next Steps

- DPS will continue to recruit new staff.
- Regional PSAPs will look at their staffing/schedules to see if they can assign a dedicated 911 call-taker during peak call volume times.
- Executive Director Neal will check with HR on having TAC staff assigned to answer 911 calls during peak hours and will work with E911 TAC and IT staff to determine the best schedule.
- Executive Director Neal and Board Staff will continue to monitor the situation, research possible solutions, and provide updates to the Board.

Public Comment

Commissioner Schirling thanked Board members and Executive Director Neal for everything they are doing during this time.

Adjournment

Motion: There being no further business, Chief Locke made a motion to adjourn; 2nd by Kelly Kennedy. There was no discussion and the motion passed unanimously by voice vote. The meeting adjourned at 11:42 AM.

Respectfully submitted:

Soni Johnson

Soni Johnson, Board Clerk

9/28/21

Date

Staffing Shortages in Vermont Public Safety Answering Points (PSAPs) - Issues and Impacts

1. Status of Staffing at Vermont PSAPs: The Department of Public Safety (DPS) PSAPs at Williston and Westminister are experiencing critical staffing shortages which have resulted in significant impacts in their ability to handle the expected volume of 911 calls. In mid-August, Williston reported eight vacancies and four individuals on extended leave (FMLA and military leave). This results in a functional shortage of twelve out of 37 positions, or approximately 32%. Westminister reported seven vacancies out of 29 positions, or 24%. Each DPS PSAP reported three individuals in training, but not yet filling shifts independently. It is not uncommon for trainees to “wash out” during the training period, so improvements in the staffing shortages do not appear certain in the foreseeable future. Vacancies are continually posted on the state’s Human Resources website.

Hartford and Lamoille each report one vacancy in their staffs of eight and ten members, respectively. There are no trainees at Hartford, and two are in training in Lamoille. St Albans reports no current vacancies and two individuals in training.

2. Primary Catchment Area Call Answer Rate Declines: As outlined in the PSAP Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), every PSAP is expected to provide adequate staffing to ensure that, on an annual basis, the PSAP processes at least 90% of their primary catchment area call volume. The Williston PSAP fell short of this metric in Fiscal Year (FY) 21 – answering approximately 85% of their primary catchment area call volume. Westminister did meet the metric in FY21 with a 91.6% primary catchment area answer rate, however this rate is approximately 4% less than was answered in the previous fiscal year. Over the past two months (July and August 2021), both PSAPs have shown continued declines in the primary catchment area call answer rate. In July, Williston answered just 79% of its primary catchment area call volume, while the Westminister PSAP fell to about 88%. In August, Williston answered only 75% of their primary catchment area calls and Westminister dropped to just under 81%. In the first week of September, Williston answered 70.2% of their primary catchment area calls; Westminister answered 78.7%.

When a call is not answered at the primary PSAP, it rolls to the longest idle call-taker at any of the five other PSAPs. The regional PSAPs are being inundated with rollover calls from the DPS PSAPs and are beginning to show declines their primary catchment area call answer rates as well as they struggle with the increased call volume.

Note: The Shelburne PSAP has not met the 90% metric for three of the past four years. While the impact of this is far less than the impact resulting from the DPS answer rates, Board staff are working to identify the reasons for Shelburne’s performance.

Figure 1 on the next page provides a visual depiction of the primary catchment area call answer rates discussed above:

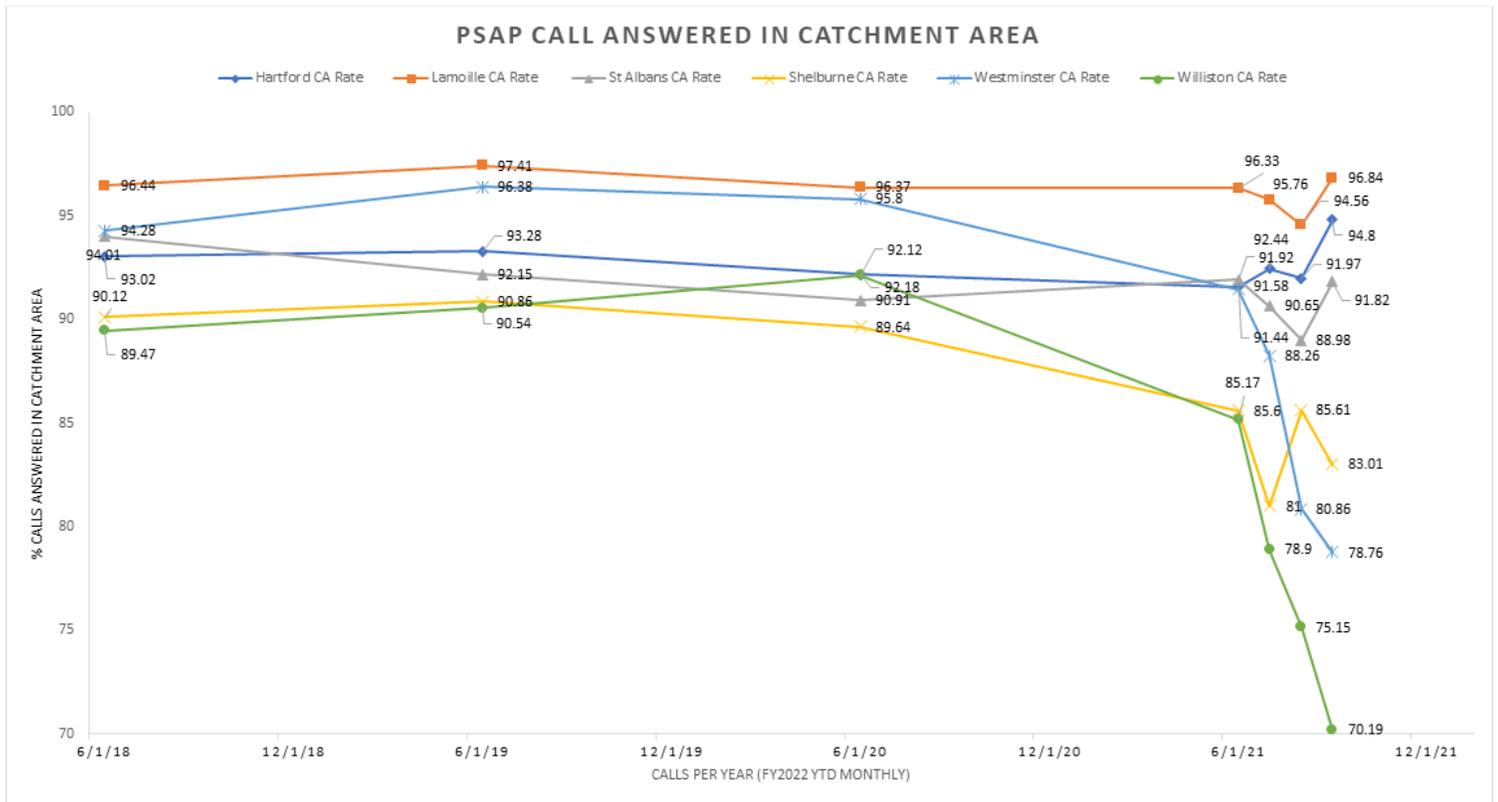


Figure 1: Primary Call Catchment Area Answer Rates – FY18 through FY21, monthly for July/August 2021. Beginning weekly measurements in September 2021.

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3. Redistribution of Statewide Call Volume: The DPS PSAPs have historically answered nearly 70% of the total statewide 911 call volume each year. Figure 2 shows that at the close of FY21, the percentage of statewide call volume handled by DPS had fallen to 63%. In July 2021, the DPS call volume total was 59.56% and in August, 57.51%. In the first week of September, DPS PSAPs handled just 54.27% of statewide call volume. The reduction in DPS call volume answering capacity means thousands of calls per year are being delivered to regional PSAPs, rather than to the DPS PSAPs which bear primary responsibility for them. The percentage of statewide call volume being handled in the regional PSAPs has increased from about 32% in June 2018 to nearly 46% in the first week of September 2021. We anticipate continued shifts in call volume distribution until steps are taken to correct course. Figures 2 and 3 show the changes in distribution of statewide 911 call volume since 6/30/2018:

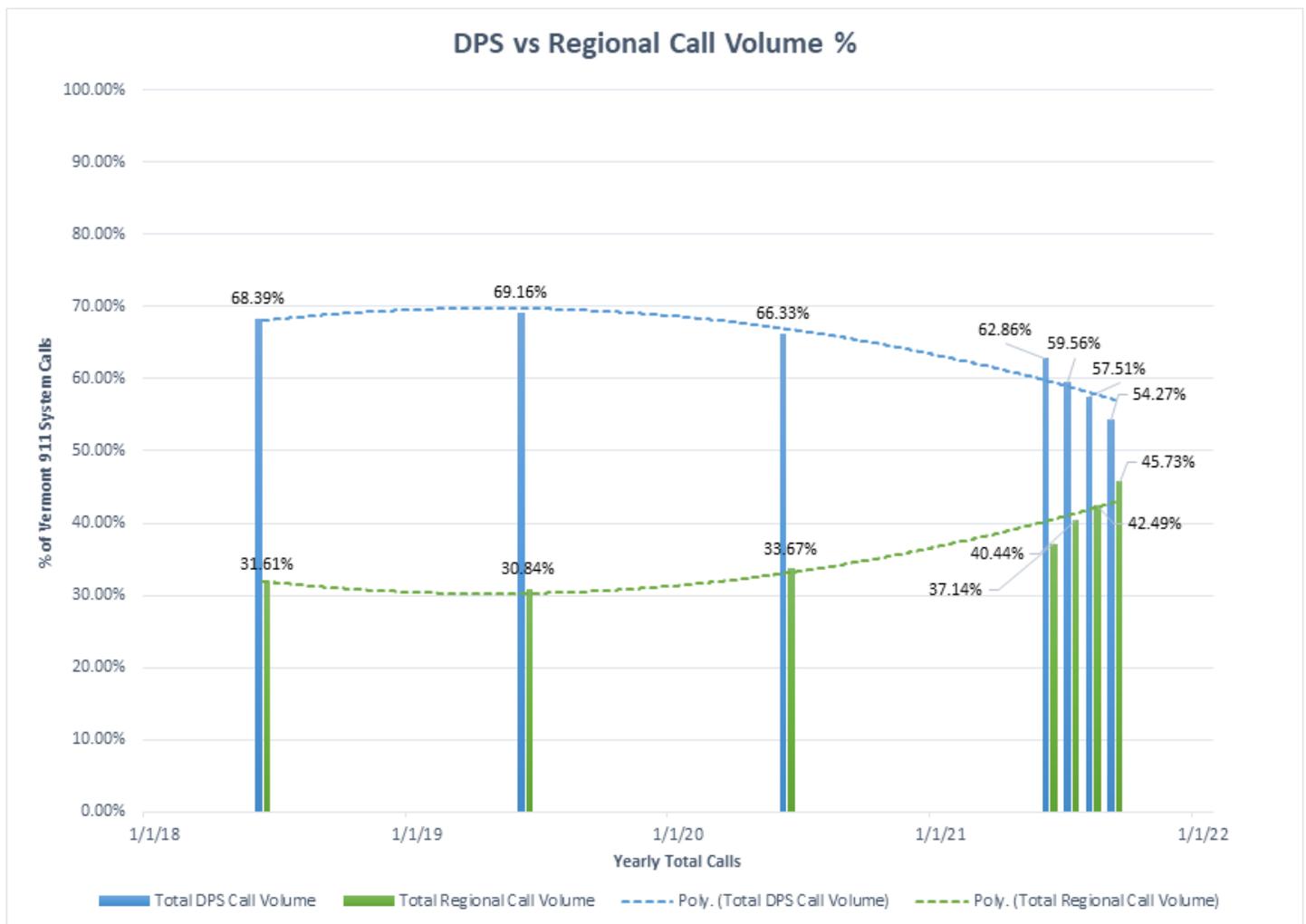


Figure 2: DPS vs Regional Call Volume - FY18 through FY21, monthly for July/August 2021. Beginning weekly measurements in September 2021.

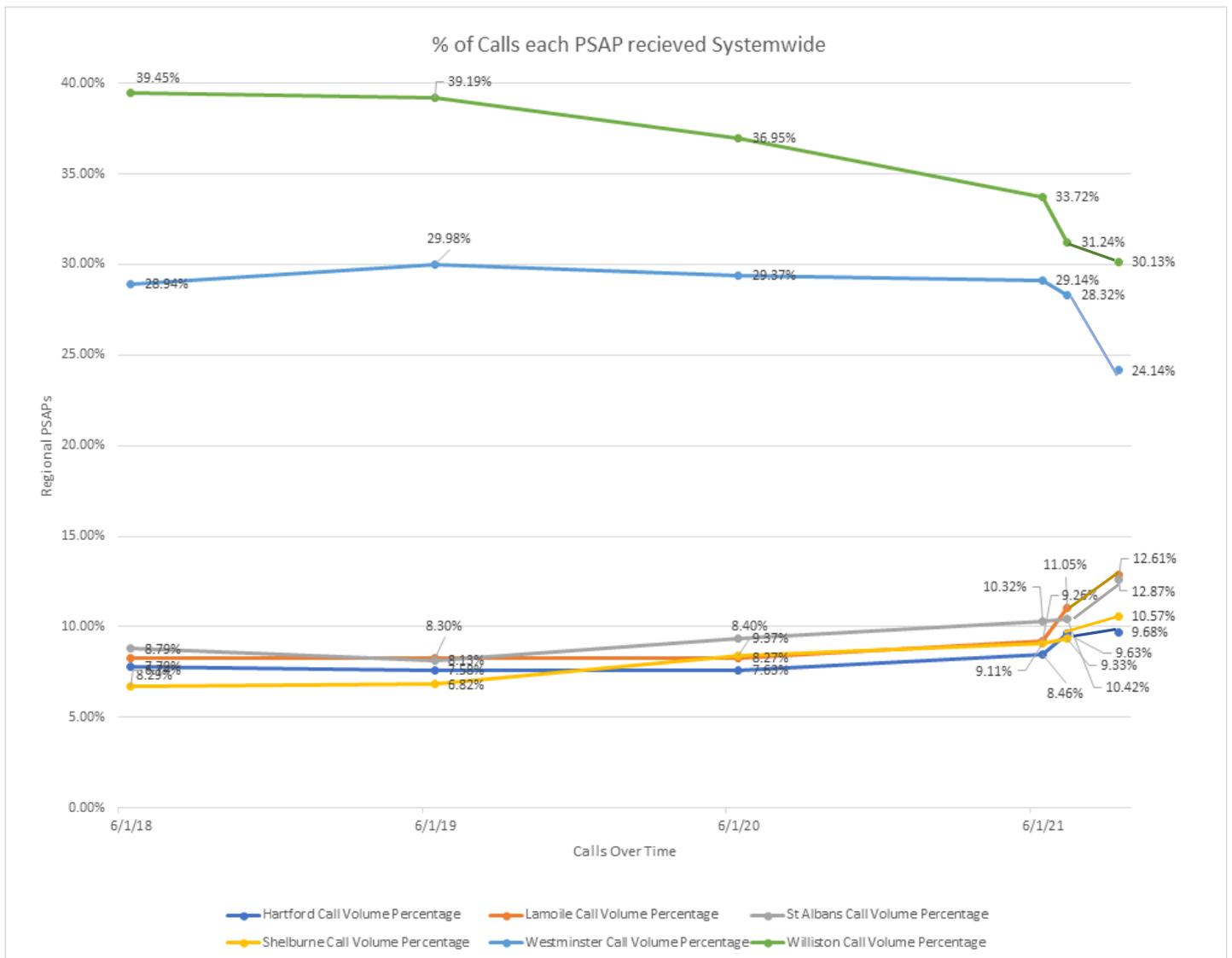


Figure 3: Systemwide Call Volume by PSAP - FY18 through FY21, monthly for July/August 2021. Beginning weekly measurements in September 2021.

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4. 911 Workstation Deployments and Usage: The regional PSAPs are equipped with two funded 911 positions each, while DPS houses sixteen positions between their two facilities (The Williston PSAP has nine funded 911 workstations; Westminster has seven). This means that DPS houses about 67% of Vermont’s 911 workstations, and the regionals (collectively) house 33%. The regional PSAPs are not equipped to handle this massive – and sustained - change in call volume.

As shown in Figure 4, five of the nine Williston positions answered less than 2% of the PSAP call volume between October 15, 2020 and August 22, 2021. The call volume in Westminster was more evenly distributed among their available positions.

Westminster	5553701	6089	13.45%
Westminster	5553702	11457	25.31%
Westminster	5553703	6228	13.76%
Westminster	5553704	5157	11.39%
Westminster	5553705	5760	12.73%
Westminster	5553706	5682	12.55%
Westminster	5553707	4885	10.79%
Westminster Total		45258	
Williston	5553601	12669	24.73%
Williston	5553602	953	1.86%
Williston	5553603	656	1.28%
Williston	5553604	592	1.16%
Williston	5553605	948	1.85%
Williston	5553606	11317	22.09%
Williston	5553607	559	1.09%
Williston	5553608	10039	19.59%
Williston	5553609	13505	26.36%
Williston Total		51238	

Figure 4: 911 Workstation Usage at DPS PSAPs – October 15, 2020 – August 22, 2021

5. Current Impacts on 911 Callers: The statewide 911 system is designed to allow for automatic and seamless redistribution of 911 calls when a primary PSAP does not have an available call-taker. This design has served the state well for many years, including during times of exceptionally high call volume such as Tropical Storm Irene in 2011. Operational differences among the PSAPs result in varying call answer times, but all PSAPs have answer times that are well within the national industry standard of 10 seconds. For example, calls are answered in 5 seconds on average at the Williston PSAP, and in 7 to 8 seconds in the remaining PSAPs. This results in only a minimal impact on callers when calls are redistributed in typical scenarios. Sustained staffing shortages, however, are not considered a typical scenario.

6. Potential Impacts on Callers, Call-Takers and Responders: As the staffing shortages continue, there is an increased likelihood of significant negative impacts to 911 callers, call-takers and emergency responders. Regional PSAPs will be less and less able to handle the increases in call volume. This will likely result in increases in call answer times, calls going into queue because there is no available call-taker, or callers abandoning the call when there is a delay in answer time. Over-burdened call-takers may be unable to provide the expected level of service to 911 callers and their ability to provide life-saving pre-arrival instructions to callers may be compromised. Notifications to emergency responders may be delayed leading to longer response times and potential negative impacts on incident outcomes.

Considerations for Mitigating Negative Impacts of Staffing Shortages

1. Potential Immediate and Short-Term Mitigation Steps – For Discussion: The Board should consider multiple options for mitigating the impacts of the ongoing staffing shortages, including the possibility of redirecting PSAP reimbursement funds toward dedicated 911 call-takers to assist in call processing during time periods with the highest statewide call volume. Immediate steps must include engagement with DPS leadership to assess plans for addressing staffing shortages and commitment to 911, and engagement with regional PSAP leadership to understand capacity and/or performance issues related to the PSAP MOU metrics. In addition, the Board should consider:

- **Hiring/Funding Dedicated 911 Call-takers:** Our data shows that a single, dedicated 911 call-taker working during specific hours would have a substantial impact on the number of calls rolling out of the DPS PSAPs to the regional PSAPs. The best benefit would result from two dedicated 911 call-takers working specified shifts. Assuming staffing levels and scheduling remains as it is today, the data indicates the number of DPS calls rolling to regional PSAPs could be reduced to less than 10%, and potentially reduced to between 0 and 3%, with dedicated 911 call-taking during specific time periods. It is important to note that some calls would still inevitably roll to other PSAPs during events that generate multiple 911 calls at once. A dedicated 911 call-taker would be responsible only for 911 call processing and would not have any dispatch or administrative responsibilities.

The data used to formulate the recommendation above was based on the historical performance in known circumstances of dedicated 911 call-taking staff. A “trial run” to test the effectiveness of this approach using the two 911 training coordinators should occur before any next steps. Board staff can initiate this process within a matter of days. If, as expected, this approach proves effective, the Board could initiate the process to develop a pool of dedicated 911 call-taking staff based either at the Board office in Montpelier or in existing PSAPs. Ensuring these individuals are assigned only 911 call-taking responsibilities is paramount to the effectiveness of this approach. If the call-takers are employed by an existing PSAP, the terms of call-taker responsibilities must be clearly outlined in an agreement between the Board and the PSAP.

Funding for these positions could come from a portion of the existing PSAP reimbursement fund of \$1,080,000. Defunding four, rarely used, DPS workstations would result in \$90,000 per year to support the dedicated pool of 911 call-takers. Additional savings resulting from the call volume portion of the DPS reimbursement would further supplement this staffing fund. Depending on the number of dedicated 911 call-takers hired, additional funding will be necessary.

- **Redistribution of DPS 911 Workstations:** The defunded DPS positions could be redeployed to regional PSAPs, if those PSAPs have the ability and commitment to staff them or to the appropriate site (Board office or existing PSAP) as workstations for the dedicated 911 call-takers.
- **Re-evaluation of the Primary Catchment Area Responsibilities:** It may be possible to redistribute primary catchment area responsibilities to further reduce the potential for overflow from the DPS PSAPs. Board staff will begin to evaluate the impact and feasibility of this approach in the coming weeks.

END OF REPORT