



VERMONT LEGISLATIVE  
**Joint Fiscal Office**

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**Fiscal Note**

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**H.935 – An act relating to emergency management**

**As recommended by the Senate Committee on Government Operations<sup>1,i</sup>**

**Bill Summary**

**T**his bill makes numerous changes related to emergency management. The bill creates and funds a Ready Response Grant Program, creates a Technical Rescue Grant Program, modifies the membership and duties of local emergency planning committees, amends statutes around town forest fire wardens and forest fire management, repeals provisions about uniform fire prevention tickets, creates the Increasing Wildland Fire Response Capacity Task Force, makes changes to the Public Safety Communications Task Force, enables emergency rulemaking authority for specific situations, and appropriates from the General Fund in fiscal year 2027.

***This bill would create two grant programs, appropriate \$500,000 from the General Fund, and modify the uses of a prior year appropriation.***

**Fiscal Impact**

Section 1 creates the Ready Response Grant Program, managed by Vermont Emergency Management (VEM), to award an annual grant to an eligible food bank to source, store, and distribute shelf-stable, ready-to-eat foods and bottled water at times and in types and quantities per a written memorandum of agreement with VEM. Section 13b appropriates \$500,000 from the General Fund in fiscal year 2027 for this program.

Section 2 creates a Technical Rescue Grant Program to be managed by the Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) Team Program Manager. As introduced, the bill appropriated \$25,000 for the Program, but this was removed in the version of the bill as passed by the House.

Section 13a makes the duty to implement these two programs contingent upon the availability of sufficient funds within the Department of Public Safety (DPS) and the Agency of Administration (AoA) to support them.

The bill also modifies authorized uses for funds previously appropriated to DPS for the Public Safety Communications Task Force and makes minor changes to per diem compensation for Task Force members.

<sup>1</sup> *The Joint Fiscal Office (JFO) is a nonpartisan legislative office dedicated to producing unbiased fiscal analysis – this fiscal note is meant to provide information for legislative consideration, not to provide policy recommendations.*

## Background and Details

The following sections have a fiscal impact.

### Section 1: Ready Response Grant Program

Section 1 creates the Ready Response Grant Program to be managed by VEM, which would be required to award an annual grant through the Program to an eligible food bank to source, store, and distribute shelf-stable, ready-to-eat foods and bottled water at times and in types and quantities per a written memorandum of agreement.

The grant would be in an amount sufficient to compensate the grantee for all costs incurred to procure and stage food and water in agreed upon quantities and locations, the costs of cycling the food and water at agreed upon intervals, the value of distribution center storage capacity, the value of operational capacity to stage materials in anticipation of need, and the costs of distribution whenever VEM seeks resource assistance from the grantee or responds to an all-hazard event or state of emergency.

Section 13a makes the duty to implement the Program contingent upon the availability of sufficient funds within DPS and AoA to support it. Section 13b appropriates \$500,000 from the General Fund to DPS to fund the Program in fiscal year 2027.

### Section 2: Technical Rescue Grant Program and Working Group

Section 2 creates the Technical Rescue Grant Program to be managed by the USAR Team Program Manager. The Program would assist Vermont fire departments, emergency medical services agencies, and technical rescue agencies with the improvement of operational readiness and investment in specialized equipment, personal protective gear, and training.

The maximum grant award to any applicant would be not more than \$5,000 in a given fiscal year. The Program would not award more than \$25,000 in total grants in a given fiscal year.

As introduced, the bill appropriated \$25,000 from the General Fund for the Program in fiscal year 2027. The appropriation was removed from the version of the bill as passed by the House. The duty to implement the Program is contingent upon the availability of sufficient funds within DPS and AoA to support it.

### Section 8: Town Forest Fire Wardens

Section 8 proposes numerous changes to statutes governing forest fires wardens and fire prevention. Some of these proposals shift the appointing and oversight authority for town forest fire wardens from the Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation (FPR) and instead designates the chief engineer of the fire department that provides protection to a town to be the town forest fire warden. The town forest fire warden could appoint deputy town forest fire wardens; the salaries of these officials would be determined by the selectboard and paid by the town (as is currently the case for the town forest fire wardens). Section 8 proposes, as part of the shift of responsibilities away from FPR and to towns, to also remove language that requires the Commissioner of Forests, Parks and Recreation to pay town forest fire wardens \$30 annually for fulfilling the requirements of 10 V.S.A. § 2645 (open burning; permits), the \$30 per diem for attending trainings required by the Commissioner, and a \$10 annual payment for each fire report that is submitted by the forest fire warden under 10 V.S.A. § 2644. These provisions are expected to have a savings to FPR of \$12,000 to \$15,000.<sup>2</sup>

Section 8 also includes language addressing reimbursement to municipalities for the cost of suppressing forest fires. Municipalities shall pay the cost of suppressing forest fires that occur on land that is not owned by ANR, but the Commissioner may reimburse a municipality for all or a portion of these costs if funds have been appropriated or otherwise made available for this purpose. For forest fires on land owned by ANR, the State may reimburse a municipality for some or all of its forest fire suppression costs at a rate determined by the

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<sup>2</sup> FPR testimony to House Committee on Government Operations and Military Affairs, January 15, 2026.

Commissioner. The bill sets forth some criteria that a municipality must satisfy in order to be eligible for reimbursement but does not set reimbursement rates or explicitly appropriate funds. Any reimbursements to municipalities for suppressing forest fires on ANR lands would come from the appropriation for forest fire suppression.

### **Section 9: Repeals Uniform Fire Prevention Ticket**

Section 9 would repeal the statute on uniform fire prevention tickets. This ticket has a fee of \$25 per violation of improper open burning or slash removal, plus \$25 more each day with total violations not to exceed \$75, and is processed through the Criminal Division of the Superior Court. These violations are very rarely issued because the process involved with the ticket is onerous, relies on fire wardens (who are not trained in law enforcement) to write criminal tickets, and the relatively low fines have limited impact. No fiscal impact is expected from this change.

### **Section 11a: Increasing Wildland Fire Response Capacity Task Force; Report**

Section 11a would create the Increasing Wildland Fire Response Capacity Task Force to examine and report on increasing Vermont's capacity for wildland fire response.

The Task Force would be comprised of the following individuals and entities:

- the Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation;
- VEM;
- DPS' Division of Fire Safety;
- the Green Mountain National Forest;
- the Vermont League of Cities and Towns; and
- two municipal fire chiefs, with one being a career firefighter and the other being a volunteer firefighter.

The Task Force would be charged with examining how to best increase Vermont's capacity for wildland fire response. On or before February 15, 2027, and again on or before July 2027, the Task Force shall submit a written report to legislative committees with its findings to date and any recommendations for legislative action. The Task Force would have the administrative, technical, and legal assistance of FPR and would cease to exist on November 16, 2027.

Members of the Task Force would be entitled to per diem compensation and expense reimbursement as permitted under 32 V.S.A. § 1010 from monies appropriated to FPR. The bill sets no limit on the number of representatives or reimbursable meetings; however, this is likely to represent a de minimis cost to FPR.

### **Section 12: Public Safety Communications Task Force**

Section 12 would authorize the use of monies appropriated or held in reserve pursuant to Act 185 (2022), Sec. B.1100, as amended by Act 78 (2023), Sec. C.115 and Act 87 (2023), Sec. 49 for DPS to procure and implement a multidisciplinary computer-aided dispatch system for public safety communications, subject to the following:

- \$2,250,000 shall be available for immediate costs associated with establishing the multidisciplinary computer-aided dispatch system and five years of software licensing fees, provided that DPS issues requests for proposals and signs contracts for services on or before January 1, 2027;
- \$190,000 shall be immediately available for cybersecurity, expanded use of Rapid SOS, and geographic information systems; and
- \$4,500,000 shall be available incrementally over three years to implement and expand the Land Mobile Radio network to include a Statewide conceptual design; detail designs for one or more proof of concept projects and initially implement pilot projects; and build out or improve 10 or more Land Mobile Radio sites, including equipment and antenna deployment at existing chosen sites.

Act 185 originally appropriated \$11 million for regional dispatch funding and created the Dispatch Working Group. Act 78 created the Public Safety Communications Task Force to “oversee and manage all phases of the development, design, and implementation of a statewide public safety communications system” and made changes to the funding appropriated in Act 185.

Of the \$11 million appropriated in Act 185, Sec. C.115 of Act 78 allocated up to \$2 million to the Public Safety Communications Task Force for analysis and planning – \$1 million was made available and an additional \$1 million could be accessed upon approval by the Joint Fiscal Committee (JFC). These funds were allocated to assist the Task Force in delivering the following resources:

- a draft preliminary design/progress update (due January 15, 2024);
- a System Inventory and Assessment (due September 15, 2024); and
- a Final Design Plan (due December 15, 2024).

The Task Force received approval to spend \$517,633.51 of the additional \$1 million that could be authorized by JFC in July 2025. This additional funding was to fully support contractual requirements in developing the resources outlined above and the per diems of the Task Force through fiscal year 2026.

Act 78 also made \$4.5 million available from the \$11 million appropriated in Act 185 for pilot projects at new or existing regional dispatch centers identified by the Task Force as demonstrating project readiness and meeting the standards of and purposes of an interoperable public safety communications system. These pilot projects would have been subject to JFC approval, however no pilot projects were presented to JFC for approval. Therefore, none of this \$4.5 million was spent.

Of the \$11 million originally appropriated in Act 185 (2022), \$1,517,634 has been allocated and \$9,482,366 is available for allocation. After the allocations proposed in H.935, there will be \$2,542,633 remaining from the original appropriation (see Table 1 on the following page).

Under this bill, notwithstanding any provision of Act 78 (2023) Sec. C.114 to the contrary, the Public Safety Communications Task Force would continue to exist until February 15, 2027. The Task Force shall meet as necessary to advise DPS on executing the Task Force recommendations and final design plan. Notwithstanding Act 78 (2023) Sec. C.114(d)(3), which established a \$150 per diem for Task Force members who are not regularly employed by the State, members of the Task Force would be entitled to per diem compensation and expense reimbursement permitted under 32 V.S.A. § 1010 (\$50) from payments appropriated to DPS. Starting July 1, 2026 until February 15, 2027, any Task Force meeting would result in up to \$250 of per diem payments made from the DPS budget.

Section 12 would also require DPS to submit written reports to the House Committees on Appropriations and on Government Operations and Military Affairs, and the Senate Committees on Appropriations and Government Operations concerning the expenditure of funds pursuant to this section. These reports would be due on or before May 1, 2027, January 15, 2028, and January 15, 2029. After the end of the three-year period, DPS may submit a request to the General Assembly to authorize the use of any remaining monies (currently expected to be approximately \$2,542,633.)

### **Sections 13a – 13b: Appropriations**

Section 13a makes the duty to implement the Ready Response Grant Program and the Technical Rescue Grant Program contingent upon the availability of sufficient funds within DPS and AoA.

Section 13b appropriates \$500,000 from the General Fund in fiscal year 2027 to DPS for the Ready Response Grant Program.

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<sup>i</sup> The full fiscal note history is available on the fiscal tab of the bill page on the General Assembly website and can be pulled up through a bill number search on the JFO page.

Table 1: History of Public Safety Communications Task Force Funding Support

Act 185 (2022)		Act 78 (2023)		H.935 Proposal	
General Fund appropriation to DPS for regional dispatch.	\$ 11,000,000	Original Act 185 appropriation	\$11,000,000	Total Available for Allocation from Original Act 185 appropriation	\$9,482,366
Held in reserve until a required regional dispatch report is submitted and further approval to expend the funds is granted by the General Assembly.	\$ 4,500,000	Held in reserve until a required regional dispatch report is submitted and further approval to expend the funds is granted by the General Assembly.	\$ 4,500,000	Available for immediate costs associated with establishing the multidisciplinary computer-aided dispatch system and 5 years of software licensing fees, provided that DPS issue RFPs and signs contracts for services on or before 1/1/27	\$ 2,250,000
To provide grants to regional dispatch facilities upon approval of JFC subsequent to review of a Regional Dispatch Facility grant plan submitted by DPS.	\$ 6,500,000	To provide grants to regional dispatch facilities upon approval of JFC subsequent to review of a Regional Dispatch Facility grant plan submitted by DPS.	\$ 6,500,000	Immediately available for cybersecurity, expanded use of RapidSOS, and GIS	\$ 190,000
		For technical expertise to assist the Public Safety Communications Task Force	\$1,000,000	Available over 3 years to implement and expand Land Mobile Radio Network; detail designs for one or more proof of concept projects and initially implement pilot projects; and build out or improve 10 or more Land Mobile Radio sites	\$ 4,500,000
		JFC may release up to \$1M for additional Task Force expertise	\$1,000,000		
		Total approved, including JFC approval of \$517,634 in July 2025	\$ (1,517,634)		
		Pilot projects	\$4,500,000		
		<i>Total expended</i>	\$0		
		Total available for allocation (includes reserve and unexpended balances, or \$11M minus total approved allocations and expenditures)	\$9,482,366	Total remaining available for allocation	\$2,542,366