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**Department of Public Safety**  
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## **MEMO**

**To:** Commissioner Michael Schirling  
**From:** Jennifer Morrison, Executive Director of Policy Development  
**Subject:** Law Enforcement Staffing / Projections  
**Date:** July 9, 2021  
**cc:** Colonel Matthew Birmingham

### **INTRODUCTION:**

In recent months concern over recruitment and retention in law enforcement, and public safety more generally, has accelerated. In response to Commissioner Schirling's request for analysis the following information has been gathered. The analysis to date includes modeling related to staffing projections in the near term.

### **BACKGROUND:**

Numerous Vermont law enforcement leaders have voiced concern that the profession is rapidly approaching a staffing crisis. Some agencies have already made changes to their service delivery plans to accommodate a dwindling workforce.

Rather than rely on anecdotal information, the Department of Public Safety (DPS) created a survey to capture recent staffing data. From this data, projections were made to future Vermont law enforcement staffing.

Even short-term staffing crises can have an outsized impact on organizations. Sustained staffing shortages predictably have cascading impacts which include but are not limited to:

- Increase in mandatory overtime and holdovers at the end of shifts;
- Decreased morale;
- Increased employee fatigue and absenteeism;
- Decreased ability to provide training to agency members;
- Decreased ability to provide training assistants, instructors and role players to the Vermont Police Academy;
- Decreased ability to provide mentoring and training to newer agency officers.

### **SURVEY OVERVIEW:**

The survey was distributed to all State and Municipal law enforcement agencies at the end of May 2021. The fourteen Sheriff's Offices are not represented in this data as their budgets, staffing numbers and



other data points do not align with the survey questions. Of the 62 total municipal and state agencies, 27 completed the survey, yielding a 44% response rate. The agency responses include 745 (67%) of the current 1,116 full-time certified and employed sworn officers in Vermont.

Moment-in-time data points were collected from 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2021 across multiple areas such as number of applications for employment received, number of officers hired, number of officer available for duty, retirements/resignations and more. There are multiple graphs attached to this memo that illustrate some of the key findings of the survey.

#### **CURRENT DATA:**

Some data can be difficult to interpret in Vermont because of the small size of most of the law enforcement agencies. A change in just a few officers can result in a large percentage change in a department of fewer than 50 officers. Small fluctuations in numbers of officers can have a disproportionate impact on the smallest agencies in the State.

Of note, there is a significant gap between the number of officers authorized and funded and the actual number of officers employed, even when use of part-time officers is considered. [See Graph 1]

One of the most concerning current data points is the 14% decline in total number of officers (full and part-time) **available** for duty between 2018 and 2021. The number of officers unavailable for reasons other than training rose by 52% in 2021 after staying relatively steady over 2018, 2019 and 2020. [See Graph 2]

#### **FUTURE PROJECTIONS:**

The most concerning projection relates to the rate of officers leaving their agency and, possibly, the profession. It is not possible to determine if the resignations or retirements result in the officer working full or part-time in another agency. This level of detail may not be relevant, as we can see that the level of hiring (full and part-time) officers does not keep pace with the reported departures. The projection of retirements, resignations and other separations for the remainder of 2021 and into the future can be seen on Graphs 3 and 4.

In 2020 (with the second class graduating in January 2021 due to Covid19), 51 officers completed the full-time basic training academy. For the remainder of 2021, only 23 officers are scheduled to complete the full-time basic training. These two years are a marked departure from the average of 73 officers certified annually. This dearth of new officers, coupled with the accelerating rate of retirements and resignations (assuming rate of other separations remains steady) will create an across the board shortage of full-time certified officers, even if some of those who resigned go to work at other Vermont law enforcement agencies. See Graph 5 for a visual representation of this gap between influx of new officers and loss of experienced officers.

#### **OBSTACLES IN THE HIRING PROCESS IDENTIFIED BY RESPONDING AGENCIES:**

The most commonly cited obstacles were a lack of well-qualified applicants and a dwindling number of applicants. The aggregate data does not point to an overall dip in the number of applications across the state. Clearly, this data point varies widely by agency.

Other obstacles to hiring identified by respondents included:



- Applicants not passing the PT and written tests;
- Applicants not passing the background investigation;
- Applicants drop out of the hiring process;
- Lack of options for polygraph testing and lack of access to timely polygraph testing;
- Lateral transfer certification process, for out of state officers, is inflexible and lengthy.

#### **WHAT AGENCIES HAVE TRIED SO FAR:**

The most common strategies that agencies have tried to increase their pool of applicants are boosting their social media presence and offering signing bonuses for successful applicants. Some other strategies have included:

- Increasing starting pay;
- Adopting an online application process;
- Streamlining the hiring process and instituting regular check ins with applicants;
- More advertising including on new sites, creation of promotional videos and intentional branding and marketing of the agency;
- Providing financial incentives to members for referral of applicants who end up getting hired.

Agencies have also made changes to try and get more applicants through the hiring process successfully. The most common changes were providing mentoring for the PT test and relaxing a standard on grooming, tattoos or appearance. Other strategies agencies have included:

- Providing mentoring or preparation assistance prior to the written entrance test;
- Relaxing standards on applicant qualifications related to past infractions or applicant conduct;
- Relaxed or changed standards in relation to job requirements, education, age, etc.

#### **NATIONAL DATA/PERF SURVEY RESULTS:**

Vermont is not alone in its struggle to hire and retain qualified law enforcement officers. The national news media has highlighted numerous agencies struggling to fill their ranks and staff shifts. Within the past two months news coverage has included:

- A staffing crisis in the Raleigh and Durham, NC “triangle” area that has left approximately 15% of area police positions vacant.
- Philadelphia PD anticipates the number of planned retirements to increase six-fold this year over last year.
- NYPD saw nearly double the number of retirements in 2020 over 2019. Chicago and Minneapolis reported record breaking retirements.
- Spokane, WA County Sheriff’s Office offering \$15,000 bonuses for lateral transfers to help fill 40 vacancies in a department of 227 sworn (17.6% vacancy rate).
- Asheville, NC announced it will no longer respond to certain calls because of a shortage of officers. They currently have 60 open positions, representing nearly a 38% vacancy rate. The *New York Times* article “*Why Police Have Been Quitting Drove in the Last Year*” dated June 24<sup>th</sup> highlights this agency and numerous other nationwide staffing challenges.



In May, the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) conducted a survey “to gauge whether the staffing crisis is a widespread phenomenon or is limited to a small number of departments.” Some of the key takeaways of the PERF survey include:

- Approximately 5% fewer new officers are being hired while resignations increased by 18% and retirements increased by 45% over the previous year.
- Acknowledging that a few retirements can represent a large percentage in small agencies, the retirement rate in agencies with over 500 sworn officers went up 27% in 2020-2021 versus 2019-2020.
- Agencies with fewer than 50 sworn officers had the highest level of officer vacancy on April 1, 2021 with an average of 91.5% of authorized positions filled. In Vermont, only Burlington PD and VSP have more than 50 sworn officers. (As of the date of this memo, VSP has 40 vacant Trooper positions.)

#### **ACTION ITEMS THAT ARE ALREADY UNDERWAY IN VERMONT:**

At a recent Vermont Criminal Justice Council (VCJC) meeting, Commissioner Schirling presented a list of possible changes that could help accelerate the rate at which we can bring new officers into Vermont agencies. These action items included:

- Ask the VCJC for immediate ability to allow agencies to administer entrance testing creating flexibility to administer “testing on demand”;
- Ask the VCJC Testing subcommittee to immediately evaluate the necessity of written entrance test for applicants who have a college degree (or high school diploma);
- Ask VCJC Testing subcommittee to allow individual agencies to establish their own physical fitness (PT) standards;
- Request that PT be dropped from the entrance testing;
- Request the VCJC immediately begin work on alternative and more flexible certification models.

#### **PROPOSED OPTIONS FOR VERMONT:**

- Develop an intentional strategy to retain the officers currently serving across the State. This may include consideration of a Deferred Retirement Option Plan (DROP) or similar program.
- Explore a role for recently retired officers who still have ability to be re-certified.
- Streamline some functions of the VCJC to allow for acceleration of rate of change to rules, regulations, etc.
- Fast track a streamlined process to obtain waivers for officers already certified in another State.
- Explore a way to make Vermont a sought-after home for would be police officers through attractive access to education and low or no interest student loans, relocation assistance/bonuses, or other strategies.
- Seek ways to change the narrative surrounding law enforcement to one in which support for the vast majority of officers who are doing exceptional work each day is valued and respected.

#### **SUMMARY:**

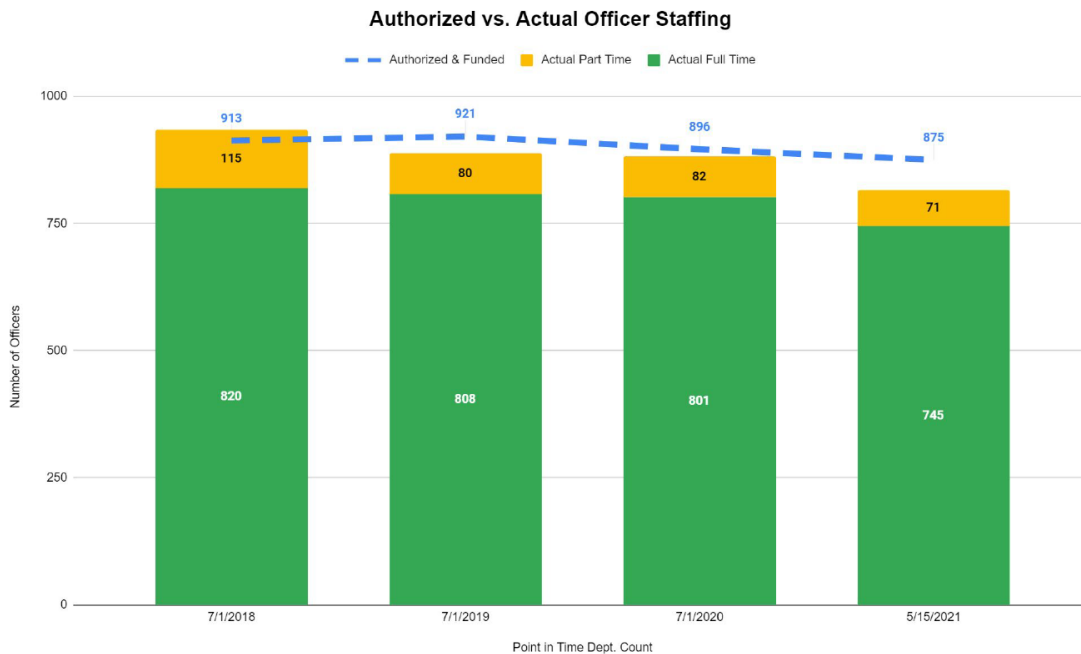
The number of officers leaving Vermont law enforcement agencies vastly outpaces the number being hired or newly certified. The forecast for the number of full-time officers available in the coming year



shows far fewer officers available than police leaders self-report as their expected staffing levels in October 2021 and January 2022. Graph 4 illustrates the gap between law enforcement leaders' expectations and the projections based on recent staffing data. Arguably, Vermont law enforcement as a whole is already in a staffing crisis. The forecast for the future is that this crisis will deepen to unprecedented levels. Immediate action is needed to minimize the impact of this staffing crisis on Vermont law enforcement agencies and the communities they serve.

The following analysis was completed by the Department of Financial Regulation using data gathered by DPS from Vermont law enforcement agencies in June 2021.

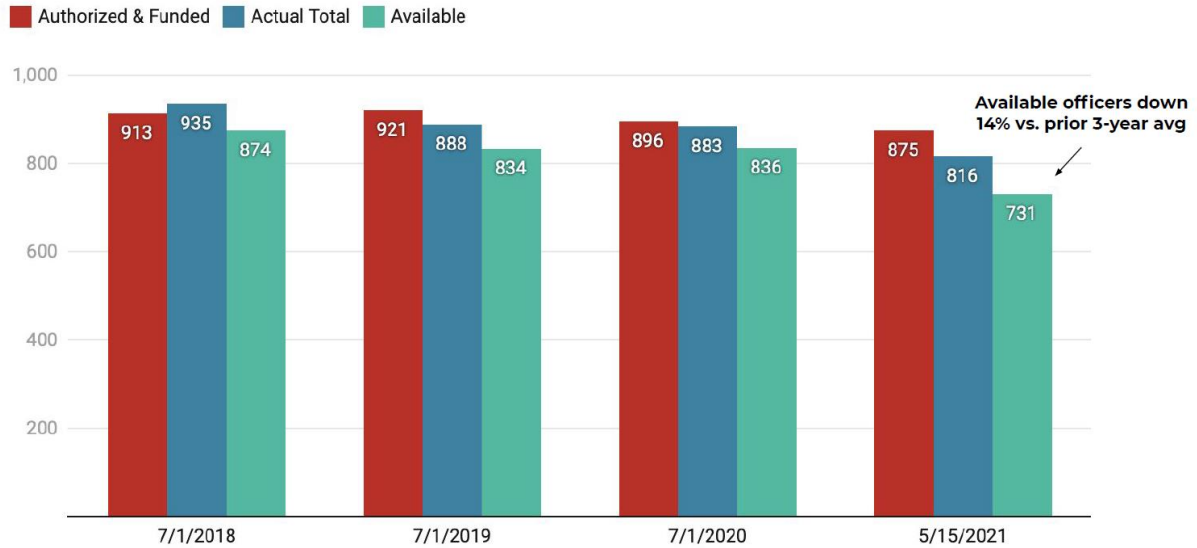
**GRAPH 1:**





**GRAPH 2:**

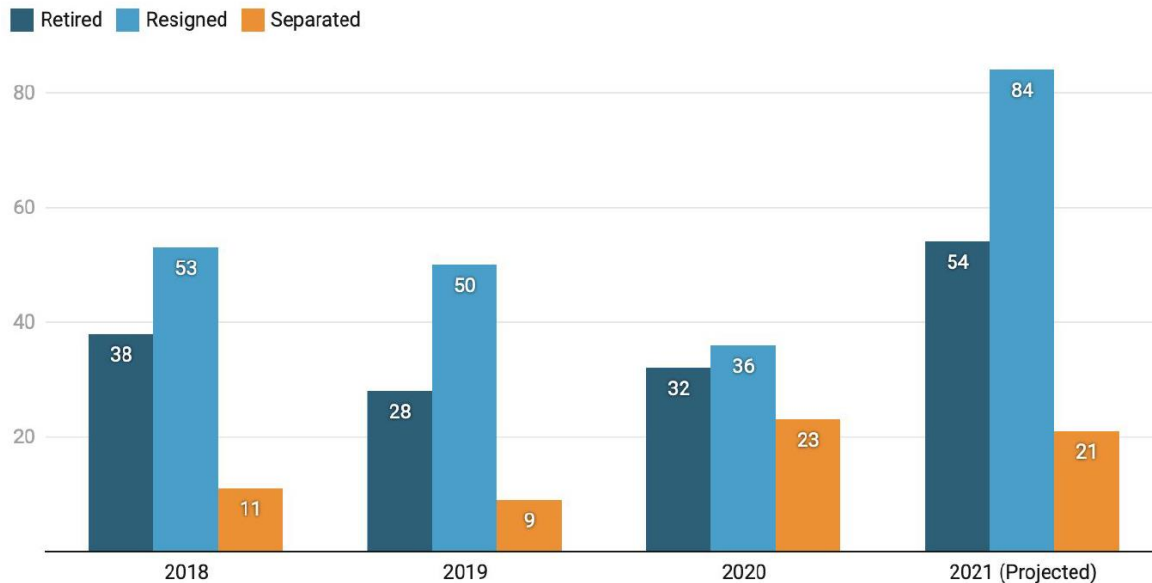
**Respondent Staffing Totals (Point in Time Counts)**



Available officers calculated as total minus sum of training and unavailable

**GRAPH 3:**

**Available Officer Attrition by Year**

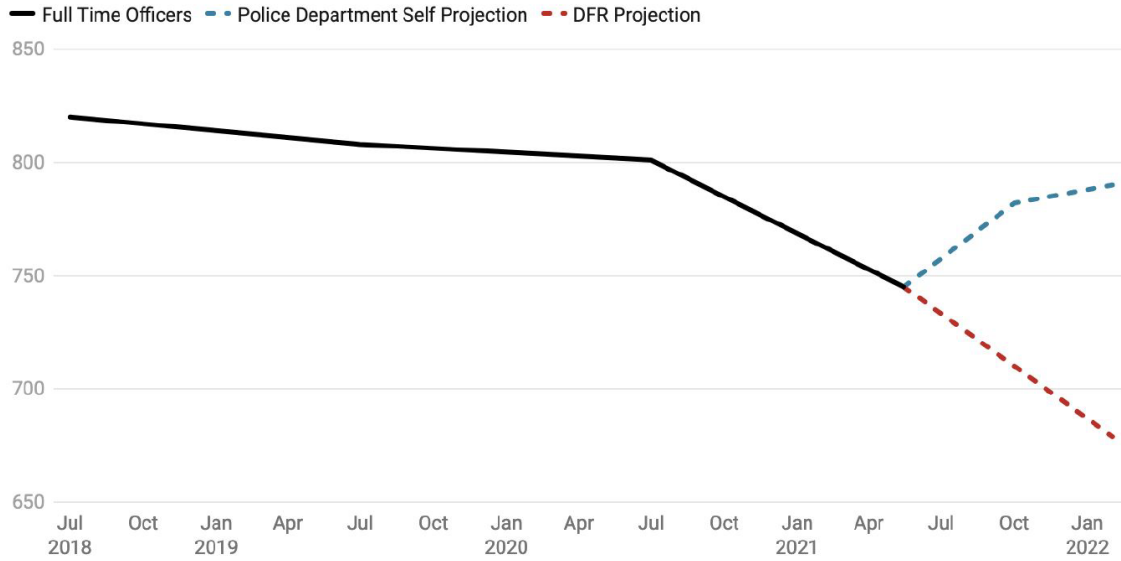


2021 projection based on linear extrapolation from current rates of departure



**GRAPH 4:**

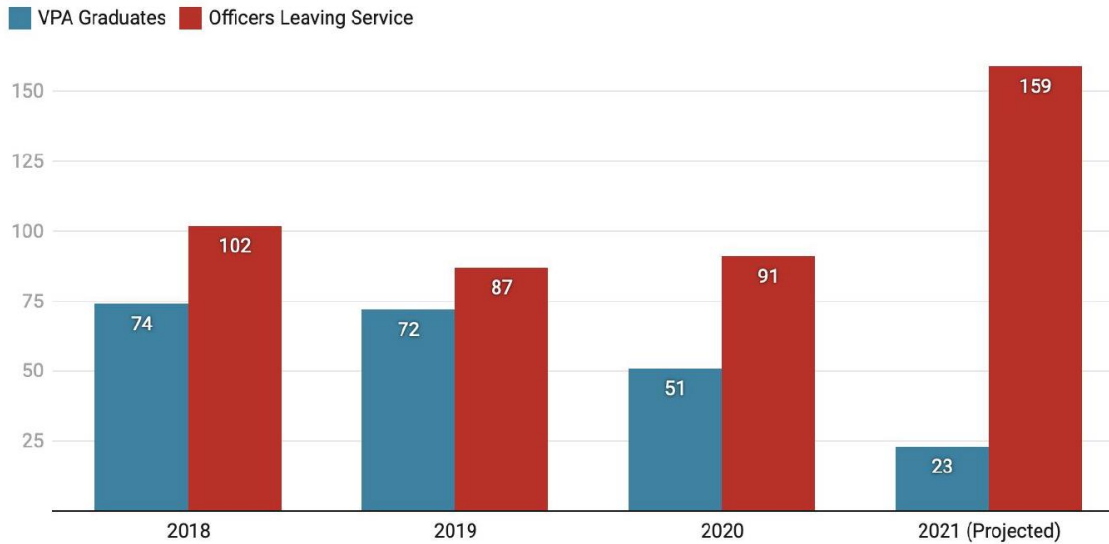
### Full Time Officers



DFR Forecast based on net change estimations

**GRAPH 5:**

### VPA Graduates vs. Officer Attrition by Year



Estimated values projected from actual number of retirements, resignations, and separations reported through the first four months of 2021