

Southshire EMS Stabilization Alternatives Report

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Executive Summary

Emergency medical services (EMS) are essential to the functioning of the southern Bennington County (Southshire) area. Facing both local and broader trends that threaten the stability of these services, a group of stakeholders convened to produce this report on stabilization of EMS in towns served by the Bennington Rescue Squad and Pownal Rescue Squad. This report analyzes alternative options for provision of EMS in these areas based on models employed elsewhere in the United States and in the context of Vermont. The group recommended a preferred alternative of a Union Municipal District for regional EMS. It recommends stakeholders take immediate action to facilitate implementation of this alternative to ensure continuity of EMS throughout the Southshire area.

Context of the Report

This report was prepared by the Bennington County Regional Commission at the request of the Southshire EMS Stabilization Task Force (SESTF), a group assembled to address pressing issues with the ongoing financial stability of EMS agencies serving the towns of Bennington, Pownal, Shaftsbury, and Woodford. The SESTF included representatives of both staff and the governing boards of the Bennington Rescue Squad (BRS) and Pownal Rescue Squad (PRS), as well as representatives of the Select Boards of each of the towns served. The group's goal was "The taskforce will determine a path forward for Bennington, Pownal, Shaftsbury, and Woodford to find a sustainable model to maintain EMS."

The group stressed that EMS is an important public service, both for residents, employers, and visitors. It noted that the absence of reliable EMS would threaten the economic underpinnings of the area.

This comes as Vermont as a state is beginning to understand that past piecemeal approaches to EMS provision are inadequate to address its current funding environment and local service demand.

Broad trends in the field include a decline in volunteership, a decline in private donation to public service provision groups (including fire, EMS, parks, and other services), increases in costs of ambulances and EMS supplies, increases in costs of EMS labor driven by lack of housing availability and statewide health insurance costs, cost pressure on the municipal tax base driven by employee healthcare costs, lack of taxable new construction, and inadequate long-range municipal capital planning for replacement of infrastructure. Other factors include Vermont's high frequency of non-transport EMS calls, piecemeal emergency dispatch landscape, irregular demand for hospital transfer services, and the state's unclear path for individuals to enter the EMS profession.

This report reviewed information from both the Bennington and Pownal Rescue Squads, including governance, finances, and service provision. It also reviewed information from the State of Vermont regarding EMS service provision statewide. It reviewed local taxpayer support for two other EMS agencies serving Bennington County, the Arlington and Northshire Rescue Squads.

Beyond Vermont, the report reviewed information on the changing EMS environment in New York, West Virginia, and municipalities in states including North Carolina, Washington, and others. Also reviewed were economic and public policy research on "regionalization" of public service provision across service classes. Broadly, this research revealed that provision of EMS services is carried out by private nonprofits (including both standalone EMS and fire/EMS agencies), private for-profits, town-level governments, county-level governments, combinations of these, and, rarely, other institutional setups.

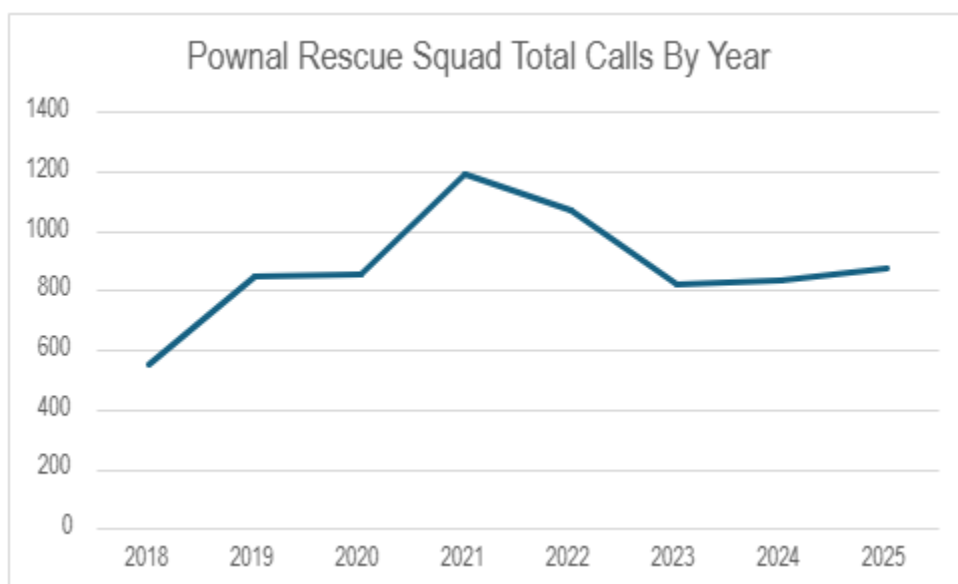
It is acknowledged that the Pownal Rescue Squad faces insolvency in less than one year of publication of this report. It is acknowledged that the Bennington Rescue Squad faces similar issues but with a meaningfully longer time horizon. The region analyzed has experienced trends similar to those faced nationwide and elsewhere in Vermont, only exacerbated by Vermont's lack of meaningful county-level government and uneven implementation on regionalized public services.

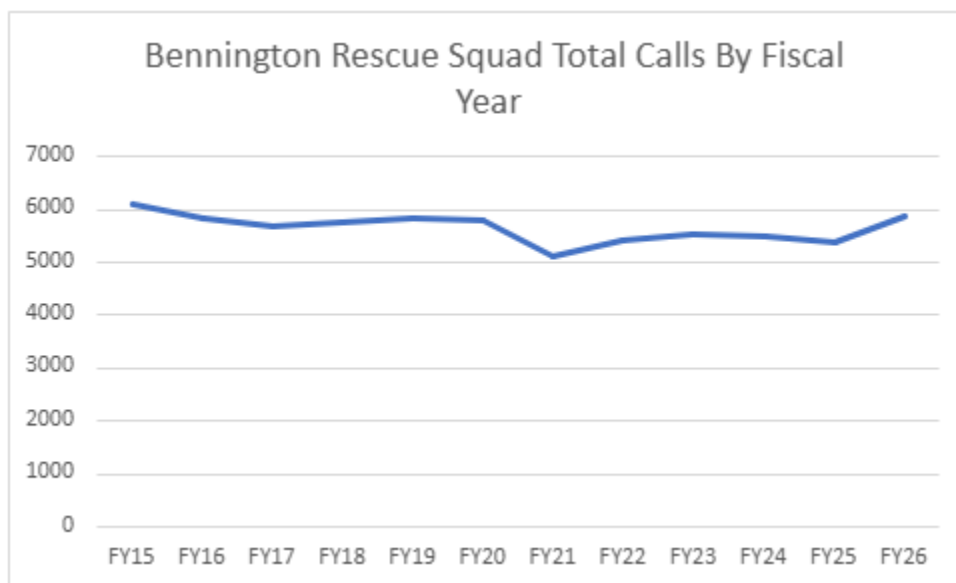
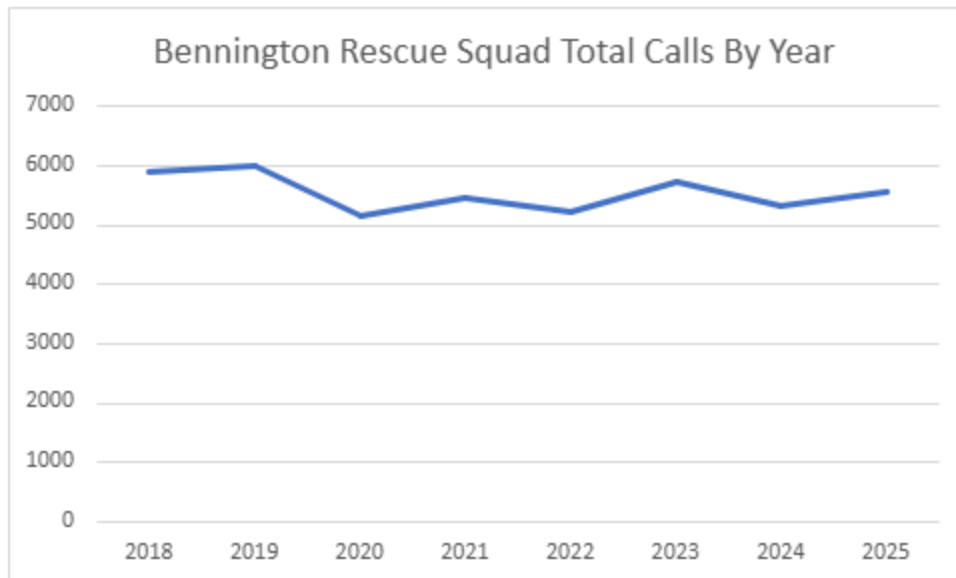
The report is limited in scope to the service areas of BRS and PRS and is focused on sustainability of EMS within the Southshire. In a limited manner, it considers impacts on other EMS agencies serving Bennington County, focusing on institutional compatibility with the changes in sustainability of these entities. It does not consider impacts on outbound mutual aid into adjacent areas of Massachusetts and New York due to the regions' meaningfully different EMS provision contexts.

General Trends in Southshire EMS

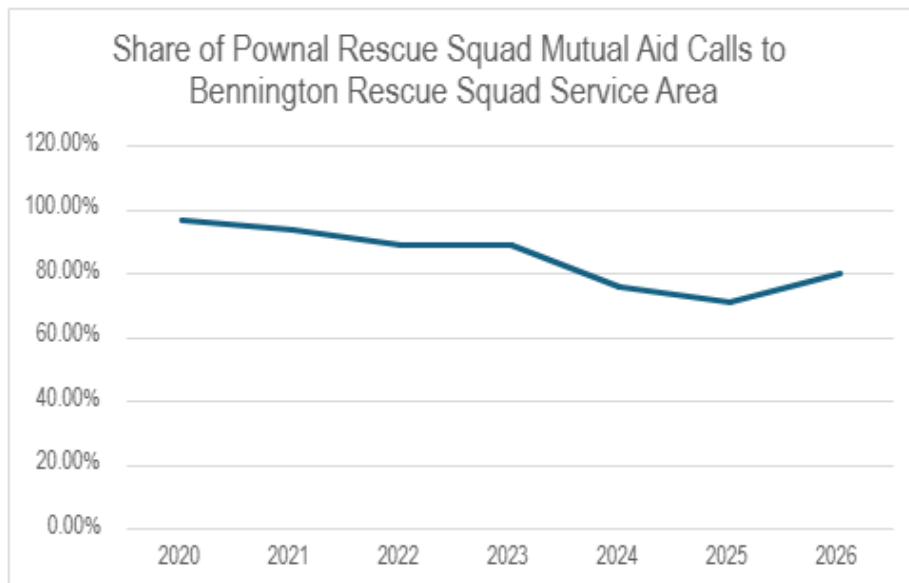
Understanding the nature of demand for emergency medical services in the Pownal and Bennington Rescue Squad service areas is instrumental in setting a path forward for stabilization of EMS in the Southshire. Likewise, no analysis of this sort would be complete without consideration of the relevant institutions' finances.

The two agencies experienced differing trends in call volumes in recent years. PRS saw an increase during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic but returned to pre-pandemic levels in years since. BRS saw a decline in call volume during the same period with a recovery to pre-pandemic trends in the years since.

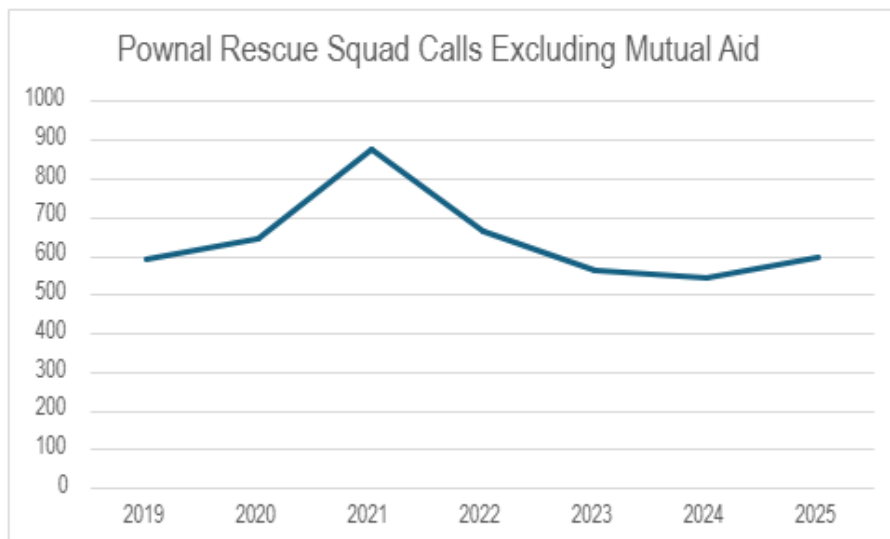




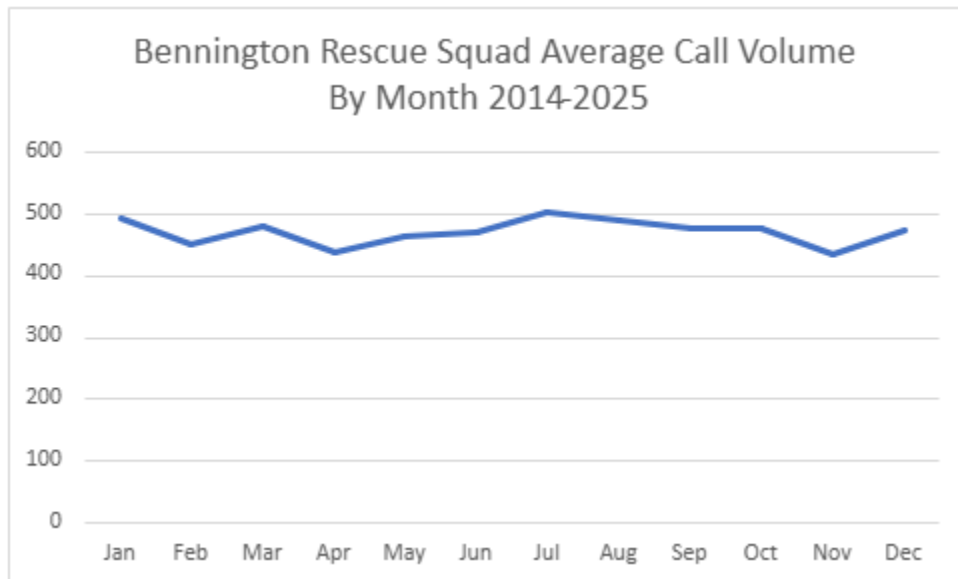
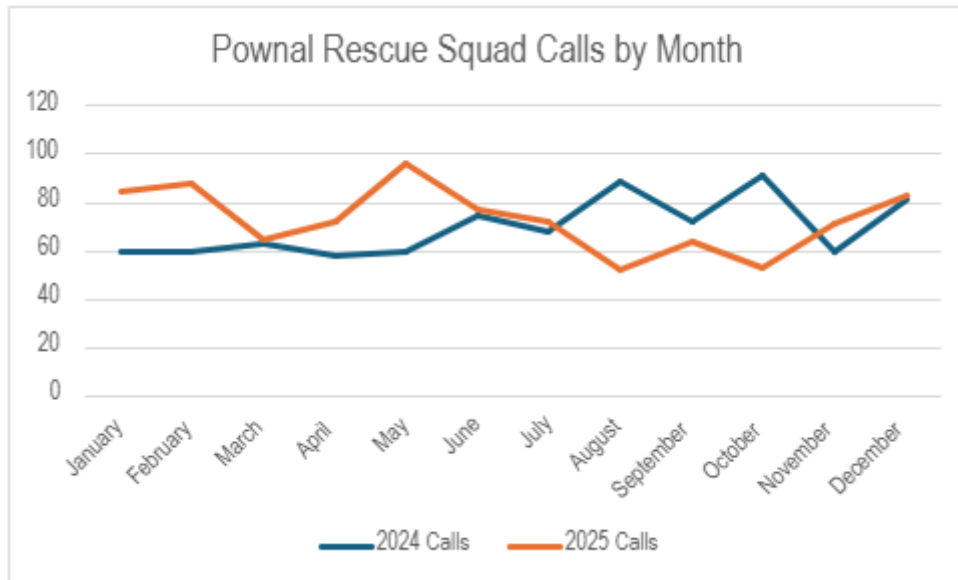
Analysis of 2020-2025 call volume data indicate that mutual aid constitutes a meaningful portion of EMS calls to PRS. PRS primarily provides outbound EMS mutual aid to the Bennington Rescue Squad, although the fraction of outbound mutual aid into the BRS service area has declined since 2020 as the volume of calls into the Northern Berkshire EMS coverage area has increased. Potential impacts to EMS service in Massachusetts are not considered in this report. On the other hand, outbound mutual aid is not a major component of BRS call volume, with less than 1% of total calls in this classification.



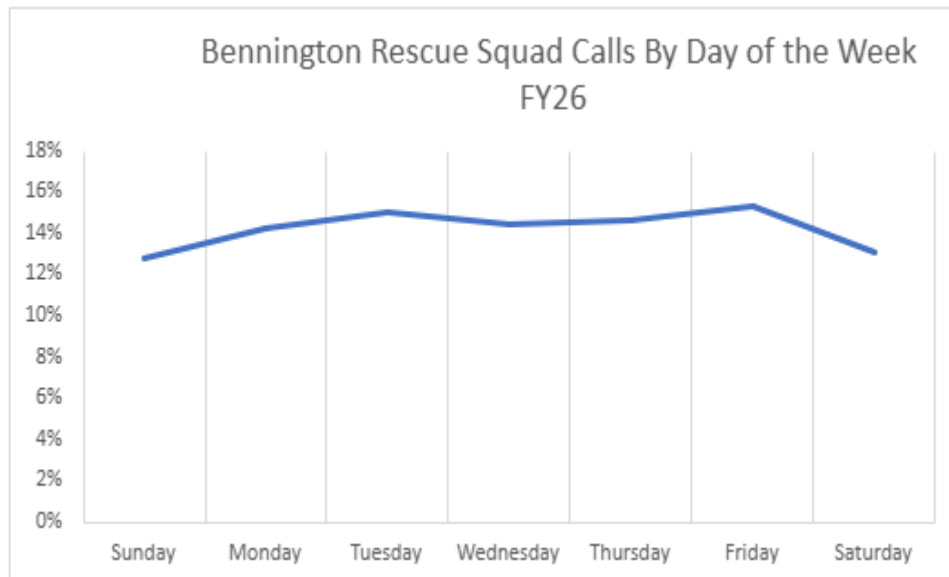
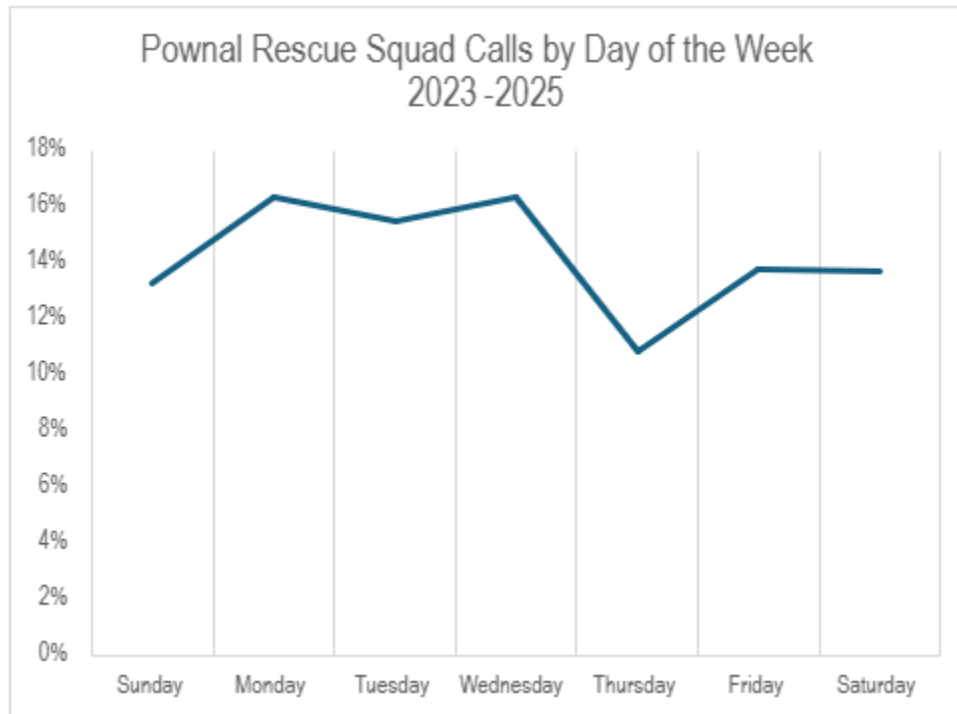
The below chart depicts PRS calls excluding mutual aid. Overall, any stabilization solution would reflect a need of 500-600 calls in Pownal per year or 1.5-1.75 calls per day.



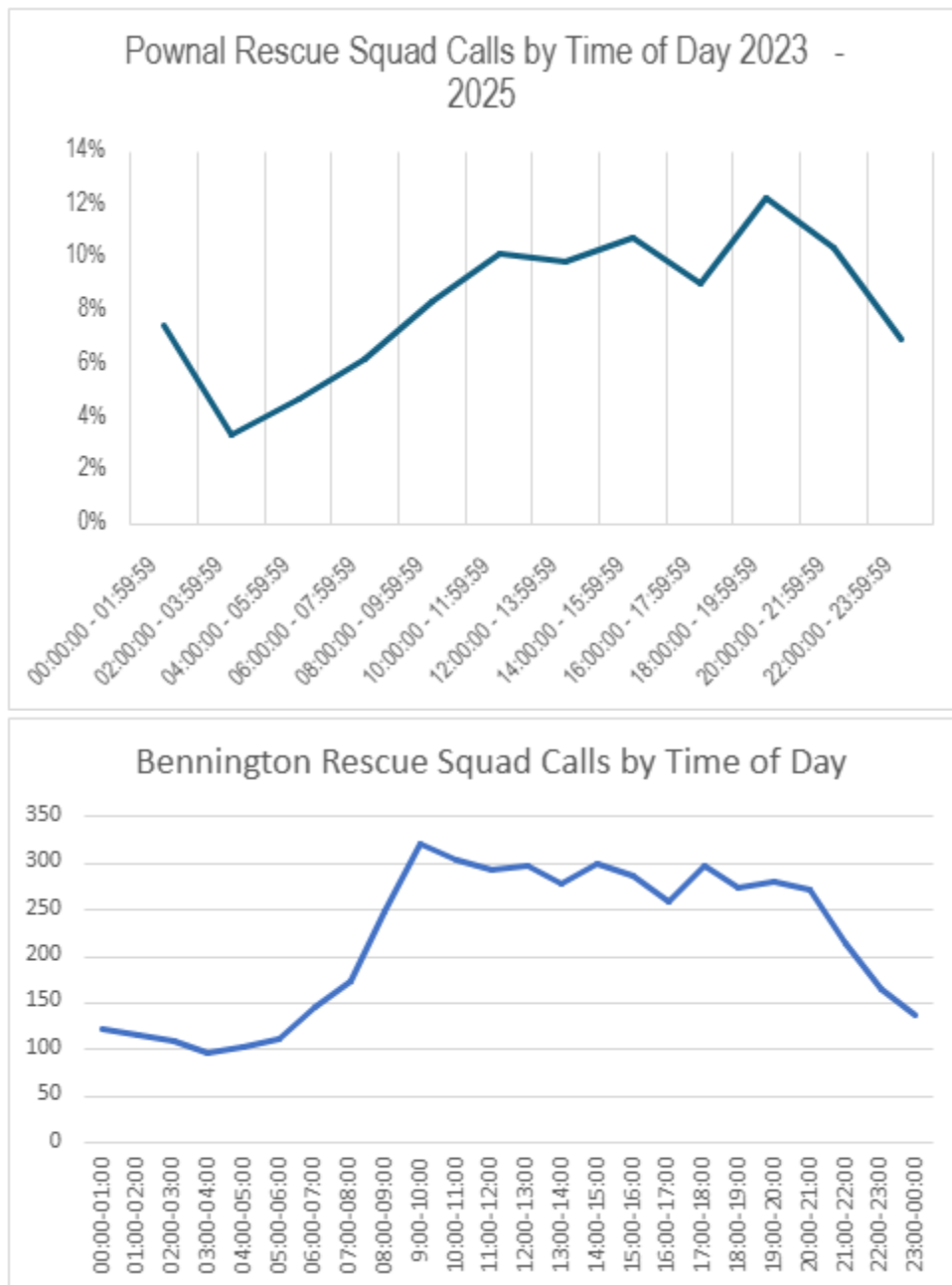
There are few meaningful trends in PRS call volume by month of the year. The much larger BRS dataset indicates that there tend to be fewer calls in February, April, and November than other times of the year.



PRS call volume is substantially greater from Monday through Wednesday than the remainder of the week. BRS call volume exhibits a substantially more regular call volume when measured by day of the week.



PRS call volume within the day peaks in the afternoon and evening before declining overnight. BRS call volume has an earlier peak during the day and more-steady volume throughout the day. Both agencies see local peaks around 6 pm. Both have similar shares of overnight calls (defined as 10 pm to 6 am) with 22.6% and 18.5%, respectively.



Finance Summary

In preparation of this report, both BRS and PRS financial statements for 2025 were reviewed. Some summary tables of these documents are below.

2025 Balance Sheet Summary			
	BRS	PRS	
Total Current Assets		\$2,371,060.00	\$56,479.14
Fixed Assets		\$2,230,063.00	\$553,237.85
Reserve funds		\$48,296.00	
Beneficial interest in perpetual trust		\$163,047.00	
Total assets		\$4,812,466.00	\$609,716.99
Total liabilities		\$1,906,567.00	\$13,554.00

2025 Payroll Summary		
	BRS	PRS
Salaries ar	\$1,576,476	\$410,272
Payroll Tax	\$135,901	\$33,947
Benefits	\$435,437	\$0
Total	\$2,147,814	\$444,219

2025 Expenses Summary		
	BRS	PRS
Payroll and Benefits	\$2,147,814	\$444,219
Medical Supplies	\$78,237	\$20,815
Insurance	\$66,720	\$65,942
Building Expenses	\$73,278	\$7,658
Ambulance Expenses	\$58,937	\$48,634
Fees including Ambulance Assessment	\$86,880	\$8,353
Other Expenses	\$470,745	\$62,322
Total Expenses	\$2,982,611.00	\$657,943.69

Broadly, BRS as an entity is approximately four times the size of PRS. Both agencies face a number of baseline expenses, including insurance, which do not scale directly with entity size.

Summary

Overall, BRS has a much greater and more regular call volume than PRS, and both agencies face similar trends in the timing of calls. BRS has greater assets and liabilities than PRS, and its greater asset base and more-diversified revenue base makes it a more sustainable entity than PRS.

Alternatives Analysis

The following options are presented for consideration. These options were chosen from a broader list of potential alternatives based on viability, financial considerations, EMS service consideration, and overarching trends in EMS service. Options considered are presented in random order. They are followed by presentation of the Preferred Alternative with information and reasoning behind its selection.

1. Merger of Nonprofits

What this alternative entails

Merger of Pownal Rescue Squad with Bennington Rescue Squads into one nonprofit EMS agency

The structure of merger could take multiple forms. The simplest would use BRS corporate form, which would transfer ownership of all PRS assets to BRS. BRS would extend its service area to cover Pownal. An alternative option could include the constitution of a new nonprofit with a new set of bylaws.

EMS service provision considerations

The merged entity would need to conduct further analysis as to staffing for coverage of the Town of Pownal. Overall, BRS would need to provide for an additional approximately 800 calls per year, 600 calls in Pownal and 200 foregone inbound mutual aid calls from PRS. This would amount to an approximate 20 percent increase in the number of calls per year from recent BRS call volumes.

Cost and finance considerations

This alternative retains the current fundamental financial model of BRS. While this model is less financially sustainable than some alternatives, most service provision scenarios would result in somewhat lower per-call costs.

There are multiple margins which would make all alternatives involving agency consolidation less costly per call. An increase in call volume per hour would be expected to increase both the labor and capital efficiency of staff time, ambulance capital, and building capital. There could also be efficiencies in supply usage as a greater call volume could improve inventory management. Administrative efficiencies brought about by consolidated administrative operations would likely lower costs, including those related to finance, quality assurance, training, and hiring.

The combined agency would see the same administrative burden related to annual municipal appropriations, as all four towns would still require an annual appropriations process which could include petition and presentation requirements for increases in municipal appropriations.

The combined agency would retain nonprofit status, which would likewise retain the ability to receive tax deductible donations and bequests without the need for a standalone entity. There are notable complications related to differing fiscal years of the two nonprofits which would require accounting support to harmonize in any merger process.

Other considerations

A consolidated nonprofit agency would benefit from scale economies in governance. One governing board would govern an agency that serves more than 6000 calls per year. This would address PRS' recent challenges with retention of governing board members.

How could it be implemented?

The simplest form of the process of (merging PRS into BRS) would require multiple steps but is not overwhelmingly complex. It would require decisions by both nonprofit boards, legal work to complete the merger and transfer assets, as well as notice to the State of Vermont. The merged entity would need to decide how to handle transition of staff and capital assets. It would need to conduct a basis analysis of areas where call times stand to change the most and decide if these changes require additional resources to mitigate call time increases. There would be meaningful, but not excessive, administrative burden in merging financial and regulatory administrative documents and efforts which could be mitigated by timing the merger to the end of either entity's fiscal year. The Town of Pownal Select Board would need to decide what, if any, extra steps would be needed as part of the annual appropriations process including the need for a new petition by the merged entity.

More complicated versions of this process could involve creation of a new standalone nonprofit and merging both entities into this new corporate form. This would add time and complication but it would benefit from the ability to draft new articles of incorporation. This could face substantial additional administrative burden including time costs associated with municipal appropriation petitioning in each town in the service district.

2. Pownal Volunteer EMS

What this alternative entails

An all-volunteer EMS agency provides ambulance services in the Town of Pownal

This could involve a reorganization of the Pownal Rescue Squad into the all-volunteer agency or creation of a new corporate entity to carry out the work (likely a nonprofit). It is acknowledged that while some towns provide such volunteer service through their volunteer fire department, Pownal's two fire departments are not positioned to take on this new service obligation even with reallocation of existing public subsidy directed to PRS.

EMS service provision considerations

EMS response times would increase until a point where service times cause volunteers to step forward to provide some form of EMS service in the community. This would be expected to be a response time much greater than those seen today with PRS in existence.

This would constitute a return to the conditions that have historically given rise to most volunteer EMS agencies including PRS. But with much higher barriers to entry and both fixed and operating costs, an older population, and the advent of alternative leisure opportunities for potential volunteers, service times to trigger groundswell volunteer EMS staffing would be expected to be greater than those that existed when PRS was founded.

These trends are not new. Both BRS and PRS started with volunteer models, and moved away from it because rallying enough qualified volunteers became unsustainable. The issue is exacerbated by municipal needs to staff volunteer fire departments which have even greater costs to professionalize than EMS agencies.

Any transition of this nature would be expected to terminate most outbound mutual aid. This would leave BRS and Northern Berkshire EMS to seek coverage for calls previously provided by PRS through changes to their own staffing, reducing sustainability of service in both coverage areas.

Cost and finance considerations

Cost considerations for this alternative differ depending on whether PRS transitions to volunteer staffing and whether a standalone nonprofit entity is constituted before dissolution clauses in PRS' articles of incorporation are triggered. If capital assets are transferred to the new entity, capital costs of ambulance and its storage location associated with such acquisitions would be reduced. Should this alternative be implemented after PRS' dissolution, there would be substantial new capital costs associated with ambulance acquisition, initial supply inventory, and legal costs.

Any EMS agency would face standalone administrative costs both to comply with regulations and medical billing. Such costs could be reduced if the municipality chooses to shoulder baseline capital and operating expenses and/or provides taxpayer-subsidized administrative labor on a contract basis to the volunteer-led corporation. Currently Pownal does not maintain a meaningful amount of excess administrative capacity and most likely could not take on increased demands of managing a volunteer EMS service.

Other considerations

Governance of any standalone volunteer entity would be a meaningful problem. PRS has struggled to retain board members, and a reconstituted entity would be expected to face similar issues with even greater burdens on potential board members. This is on top of new volunteer labor demands and an increased need for local recruitment. Given an existing shortage of volunteers these new volunteership demands would risk pulling volunteers from other local needs most importantly including the fire departments but also recreation and municipal governance.

How could it be implemented?

A transition of PRS to volunteer staffing would require recruitment of new volunteer board members willing to engage in the work to change personnel management, wind down purchasing, terminate contracts, and other necessary actions.

This would be doubly challenging for a plan that involves creation of a new standalone volunteer EMS agency. This would require additional volunteer advisory labor, fundraising efforts, EMT recruitment efforts, and other work. Some of this burden could be offset by allocation of in-kind donations of staff time from the Town of Pownal with the justification of stabilization of this essential service, but this would take time from other local core services including municipal administration and oversight of highway, fire, finance, and other administrative functions.

3. No Action

What this alternative entails

No new action is taken.

The Pownal Rescue Squad continues to provide EMS service to the Town of Pownal until the agency reaches insolvency at which time it ceases operation pursuant to its articles of incorporation. After this point, Pownal would not receive EMS service until another entity finds provision of such service advantageous. The Bennington Rescue Squad would avoid an obligation to take on service calls that it cannot profitably serve.

EMS service provision considerations

EMS service in Pownal would cease at some point in the near future, leading to a sudden stop to EMS service in the town. This situation would continue until conditions change to the point where either there is an incentive for a neighboring EMS agency to provide service in part of, or all of, the town, or give rise to a local volunteer-staffed and managed agency as outlined in Alternative 2.

Cost and finance considerations

Costs of this alternative are lowest of all options, as Pownal municipal appropriations would cease after the fiscal year during which the PRS closed.

Other considerations

The relative desirability of life in Pownal relative to other regional rural towns would decline. This would place downward pressure on the price of all types of real estate, generally lowering the municipal grand list and reducing the incentive to build new structures in the town. Cost savings would be partially offset by increased tax rates associated with this generalized decline, but this effect would take some time to manifest, likely after the next townwide reappraisal.

How could it be implemented?

The Town of Pownal confirms this is the plan of action and relays this information to voters no later than during the 2027 budget process, during which it ceases to offer a ballot article funding PRS and reallocates funds previously subsidizing EMS.

4. Interlocal contract

What this alternative entails

Creation of an interlocal contract for provision of EMS service via an interlocal service contract among the towns and one regional EMS agency.

The agency providing service would retain status as an independent nonprofit corporation. Such an agreement would be created pursuant to 24 V.S.A. 4900-4947. One town would enter into agreement with each of the others, and then that town would enter into a contract for emergency services provision with the nonprofit agency through standard municipal contracting authority. It is important to note that because this alternative is structured using interlocal contracting statute, the alternative only considers scenarios operating through interlocal agreements. This does not include an institutional design where each town negotiates on its own with the regionalized EMS agency.

Note: This alternative is agnostic to whether the single regional EMS agency is brought about via a merger of nonprofits as in Alternative 1, or whether via a short-term period of No Action as in alternative 3 with BRS transitioning to the regionalized body without the burdens associated with the merger process.

EMS service provision considerations

Like the Alternative 1 (Merger of Nonprofits) and Alternative 5 (Union Municipal District) alternatives, EMS service within the broadened service area would need to consider the distribution of calls within the combined service area. Certain areas may see increased response times, while others could see average response times decrease, particularly areas along the Pownal-Bennington border, due to increased staffing dispatched from Bennington and more-frequent dispatches that happen after drop-offs at the hospital in Bennington without returning to the BRS squad house.

Cost and finance considerations

A key difference between this alternative and the Merger of Nonprofits is that there would be a contractual relationship between town(s) and the EMS agency, which would remove requirements for petitioning for appropriations from the agency. This decreases financial uncertainty for the EMS agency by allowing it to raise municipal contribution rates through the contract negotiation process. Likewise, contractual arrangements avoid the risks of sudden cessation of EMS services in a town should voters not approve the town's annual appropriation to the EMS agency petitioning for funds.

A key benefit of this alternative over the Union Municipal District alternative is the latter's loss of nonprofit status for the EMS service provision agency, limiting the appeal of private donations to the entity. A key point of financial uncertainty is that the contractual model retains the municipal prerogative to seek cheaper alternative coverage, including and particularly Shaftsbury's option of receiving coverage by the Arlington Rescue Squad, but this also applies to Pownal's potential option to seek coverage from Northern Berkshire EMS and Woodford's potential to seek coverage by Deerfield Valley EMS. Exit options decrease the overall regional stability of EMS in the Southshire. Such considerations likewise apply to the "Merger of Nonprofits" alternative but with even less certainty due to potential contractual termination clauses that could be triggered within the fiscal year without voter approval via the municipal appropriations process.

A key component of inter-municipal coordination of shared services is the tension between subsidies based on total cost versus marginal cost in contract rates. Broadly, subsidies based on total cost are more appropriate for public services in which complete geographic coverage and reliable service availability are required, as is typical in EMS and related services like fire coverage. Such subsidies could be best designed as flat per-person rates for each town. Subsidies based on marginal cost are more appropriate where there are meaningful differences between the cost of service to the towns and local call volumes. Marginal cost-based subsidies would be preferred where there is existing excess capacity at the service provider, where fixed costs are sunk, where per-person call volumes vary greatly, or where towns have alternative provider options in a competitive services market. Marginal cost-based contracts still require fixed costs to be paid by some entity, and such a contractual design would destabilize service provision as fixed costs of a newly-regionalized entity would not be entirely sunk, and risks towns attempting to force each other to pay disproportionate shares of fixed costs. As the focus of this study is on sustainability over the medium to long term, the default assumption of this alternative would be that any contract-based institutional design be based around subsidies decided on total rather than marginal costs, thus allowing for greater sustainability.

Other considerations

Governance of this combined entity would require a single board, like the "Merger of Nonprofits" and "Union Municipal District" alternatives. The lead town would need manage some administrative burden related to interlocal contract negotiation and would likewise manage legal risks associated with contract rate disputes among towns.

How could it be implemented?

First, the agencies involved would need to decide on whether the regionalized EMS agency is best formed via the merger process or via the closure of PRS. Next, the lead town would be designated and in conjunction with the regionalized entity would enter joint contract negotiations with all service towns collectively, such that all towns are jointly negotiating for the provision of EMS services with the provider and the lead town. A multi-year contract with annual rate increases including contingent triggers for additional rate increases would be the most sustainable.

5. Union Municipal District

What this alternative entails

Creation of a new municipal entity for the provision of EMS services.

Union Municipal Districts (UMD)s have all powers of their member municipalities including ability to levy property taxes. They are operated pursuant to rules in 24 V.S.A. 4801-4868. This "Bennington Regional Ambulance District" would serve as a standalone entity with an independent governing board appointed by member towns. This new district would then work to levy Union Municipal District taxes, either separately from or in conjunction with municipal tax collectors.

Union Municipal Districts are created by voters via town meeting ballot article after a report of a "Joint Survey Committee" created by the legislative bodies of potentially-participating municipalities. Such an entity could then see the Bennington and Pownal Rescue Squads merged into it or contract with a retained nonprofit corporation should tax law or incorporation provisions prevent a merger.

EMS service provision considerations

This alternative faces many of the same considerations as all three alternatives that involve a single regionalized entity (Alternatives 1, 4, and 5) regarding distribution of staff and assets to adequately provide for the combined service area.

Cost and finance considerations

Owing to Union Municipal Districts' delegation of property taxation authority, it is the most stable corporate form of considered alternatives. Further, and differing from interlocal agreement models, there is a stronger barrier to entry and exit because such decisions must be made via town meeting ballot article, rather than through the contracting authority of municipal legislative bodies.

Should the institutional design end in a merger of both nonprofits into the UMD rather than contracting with a merged nonprofit this study recommends creation of a standalone "Bennington Area EMS Fund" nonprofit, which could engage in fundraising, receive tax deductible donations, and provide non-core benefits to the entity and its employees. Such a nonprofit has analogs in the fire service space, where fire benefit associations engage in similar activities related to area fire departments otherwise almost entirely funded by municipal taxpayers.

Other considerations

Operation of Union Municipal Districts have much in common with operation of Communications Union Districts, which behave similarly but are designed to facilitate telecommunications services. All regional towns have experience with the Southern Vermont Communications Union District, which is incorporated under these similar provisions and which has successfully engaged in contracted high-speed internet service expansion in member towns.

UMDs are also somewhat resilient to changes in municipal membership. New towns can opt to join the district in the future via their own town meeting articles. The entity, with its delegated municipal authority, can also engage in interlocal agreements to provide services in towns that are not district members. This would allow it to be an adaptable corporate form in the face of changing viability of adjacent EMS service areas.

How could it be implemented?

A joint study committee would be immediately convened by the four towns, which would complete the required separate study that could incorporate this study as part of its report alongside any other specifics as to the operation of the new UMD. This group would also be tasked with drafting a town meeting article for creation of the UMD in each town. Town Select Boards would then consider whether the article could be placed directly on the ballot or would require petition by townspeople. The voters in each town would then decide on participation in the district. Should one or more towns not approve joining, the towns opting to join the district would then meet to decide whether the district is viable without participation of any towns not voting to join. Should the district be deemed viable, the towns would move to appoint a board and launch the UMD. At that stage, merger or contracting arrangements would be made, with potential for transition to the new governance model without service disruption.

Preferred Alternative

The preferred alternative is Alternative 5, Union Municipal District. The preferred alternative would include a merger of BRS and PRS as outlined in Alternative 1, and allow for towns choosing not to participate in the Union Municipal District to establish contracts with the District, as in Alternative 4. The preferred alternative would entail creation of a Union Municipal District, with a merger of BRS and PRS in advance of the district's implementation and the option of engaging in interlocal contracts with any towns currently served by BRS or PRS who do not choose to participate in district governance.

Suggested implementation timeline

Below is a timeline implementation of the preferred alternative.

October 2026: Select Boards approve creation of study committee and decide on petition requirement.

October 2026: Towns begin outreach on the proposed district.

October 2026: BRS and PRS begin merger efforts.

November 2026: Sends to Secretary of State's office for review.

December 2026: Study committee completes work, delivers study to towns with Town Meeting ballot article language and decisions on interim appropriations.

January 2027: Towns include ballot article in Town Meeting warning

October-February 2027: Towns engage in outreach efforts to support ballot articles.

March (early) 2027: Voters decide on Union Municipal District

March (late) 2027: Towns approving Union Municipal District convene to decide on viability of district contingent on any "no" voting towns

Spring 2027: Merger between BRS and PRS completed with further integration work in following months.

May 2027: Union Municipal District establishes service contract with merged entity.

May 2027: Union Municipal District begins efforts to create a unified FY28 budget in advance of Bennington budget meetings.

June 2027: Union Municipal District presents budget to all Select Boards, and provides advance budget notices to towns with calendar year budgets or those receiving services via interlocal contract.

Summer-Fall 2027: Union Municipal District transition begins.

November-December 2027: Union Municipal District in operation. District receives interim appropriations.

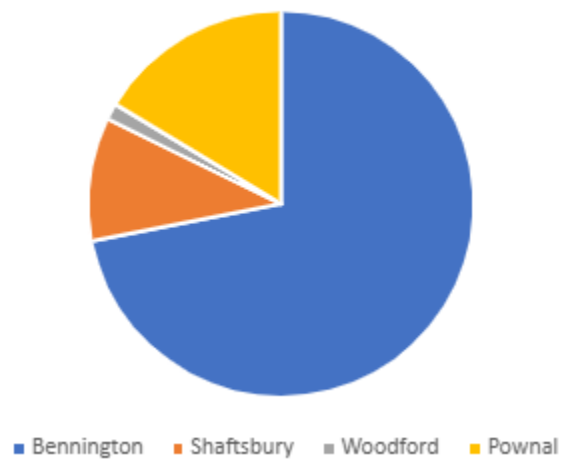
Calendar year 2028: First Union Municipal District taxes are levied.

Supporting Material

Municipal EMS funding by town

	Bennington	Shaftsbury	Woodford	Pownal
Current EMS appropriations by town	\$289,610	\$41,677	\$5,500	\$66,000
Appropriations at statewide average of \$27 per person	\$413,991	\$97,146	\$9,585	\$87,966

Town Share of Current Municipal Appropriations



Regionalized Agency \$27 Scenario Appropriations Shares

