

Southshire EMS Stabilization Analysis Summary Memo

What is the problem?

Emergency Medical Services (EMS) in southern Bennington County face growing financial and operational challenges that threaten long-term service continuity. The study was commissioned by the Southshire EMS Stabilization Task Force to identify a sustainable future for EMS serving Bennington, Pownal, Shaftsbury, and Woodford. The most immediate concern is that Pownal Rescue Squad (PRS) is projected to become insolvent within approximately one year, while Bennington Rescue Squad (BRS) also faces long-term financial pressures. Local taxpayers have historically provided funding at per person rates substantially lower than the statewide average and those in the northern part of Bennington County. Without change, EMS would cease within the next decade.

What is the proposed solution?

The report recommends establishing a regional ambulance district governed jointly by participating towns. The preferred model includes:

1. Merger of Bennington Rescue Squad and Pownal Rescue Squad into a single regional EMS operation.
2. Creation of a Union Municipal District to oversee EMS regionally with a board made up of representatives of towns opting-in to create the district and whose budget would be set by this board.
3. Ability for non-member towns to contract for services if desired.
4. Long-term, dedicated funding through municipal taxing authority.

What is the timeline for this solution?

Merger discussions between Bennington and Pownal can begin immediately and are, at this stage, private matters between the agencies. Political steps to constitute the required "study committee" can take place immediately at the Select Board level. Language could be prepared for the Town Meeting ballots for a potential vote in 2027, with full implementation by fiscal 2028.

How much will this cost taxpayers?

As the existing agencies lose money each year, stabilization will require substantial investment of public funds over time at levels not less than the statewide average. That would amount to approximately an initial \$200,000 per year in additional funding, spread out across the towns. The greatest cost increases would be expected in Shaftsbury which currently contributes the least per person of among Southshire towns. The study did not assess specific cost savings due to operational uncertainty relating to staffing, equipment, and facilities.

How will EMS service change for me if this plan is implemented?

Hopefully not much. A combined agency would plan to locate staff to limit response time increases. Ultimately, response times will be dictated by staffing and equipment availability combined with approved the agency's approved budget.

What alternatives were considered?

Alternative	Advantages	Concerns
1. Merge BRS & PRS Nonprofits	Operational efficiencies, stronger governance, larger service area	Retains financial vulnerabilities of nonprofit model
2. Volunteer EMS in Pownal	Lower payroll costs	Unlikely to recruit and sustain enough volunteers; lower service reliability
3. No Action	Lowest short-term cost	Loss of EMS service in Pownal after PRS insolvency
4. Interlocal Service Contract	Greater funding certainty through contracts	Towns could leave agreements, reducing long-term stability
5. Union Municipal District (UMD)	Dedicated public structure, taxing authority, strongest long-term stability	Requires voter approval and organizational transition

Bottom Line

The study concludes that maintaining separate EMS organizations is increasingly unsustainable. Regionalization through a Union Municipal District, combined with a merger of the existing rescue squads, offers the strongest path to preserving reliable emergency medical services for Bennington, Pownal, Shaftsbury, and Woodford while providing the long-term financial stability necessary to avoid service disruptions.