



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

Office of the Governor

P.O. Box 1475
Richmond, Virginia 23218

March 31, 2022

Governor Youngkin,

In the wake of the severe January 3rd, 2022 winter storm and its devastating impact across the Commonwealth that resulted in 833 accidents, 819 disabled vehicles, and motorists stranded for upwards of 24+hours on I-95, the Northam appointed Secretaries of Transportation, Public Safety and Homeland Security requested a third-party evaluation and after-action review and report.

The review of this incident revealed that the Commonwealth's response was overcome by the severity and magnitude of the storm, and the administration failed to recognize its effects until January 5th.

The report indicates the substantial involvement of the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) and the Virginia State Police (VSP) as the primary managers of the incident response with some limited involvement by the Virginia Department of Emergency Management (VDEM) – primarily for communication amplification – and almost no apparent involvement by the Governor or his senior staff. The report does not indicate that there was ever a point when these groups were in a room together to coordinate actions and discuss tactical responses.

The report indicates that prior to January 3rd, storm executive action was not taken to prepare for the possibilities of an event more severe than the initial "likely" weather scenario provided by the outside, third party, weather service. As a result, VDOT mobilized equipment and resources at level IV, not anticipating the need for a maximum level V response; VSP committed additional staffing and positioning of police cars to alert drivers to the inclement driving conditions; and VDEM and the executive office appear uninvolved prior to the storm – they are not mentioned in the timeline of the report. For reasons not revealed in the report and perhaps the administration's reliance on the "likely" weather scenario

from the weather service, the review does not indicate that the Secretaries considered asking the executive office for an emergency declaration, and neither the Governor nor his staff appear to have asked the Secretaries for an evaluation of potential circumstances for an executive order. In fact, the Governor or his office was not mentioned until January 5th in the timeline provided in the report.

During the challenges faced over January 3rd and January 4th, VDOT and VSP attempted to mitigate the severe impact of the storm, but they suffered from a lack of previously deployed equipment and insufficient warnings to the public in the form of announcements, texts, radio, and highway signage. As noted in the report, a “stay off the roads” message was not communicated initially to the public, and the earliest strong warning from VDOT occurred at 3:15 pm which indicated that “Travel remains hazardous through the Commonwealth.” VDEM was finally asked by VDOT to send out a Wireless Emergency Alert at 9:14 a.m. on January 4th, that was directed to motorists stuck on I-95: “I-95 Drivers: State & locals coming ASAP with supplies & to move you. www.virginiadot.org” As a result, the report indicates that “VDOT fielded over 20,000 calls on January 3rd and 4th, a five-fold increase from the prior week.”

With the missteps regarding communications, equipment deployment, and fully integrated activities, the report indicates that the leadership of VDOT and VSP “conducted a helicopter flyover to gain larger scale situational awareness.” However, the state still did not declare an emergency or attempt to activate the National Guard to provide relief to the stranded motorists. The review notes that at 3:30 pm on January 4th, the last trapped motorists were evacuated from I-95 and the highway reopened at 7:30 pm, bringing the multi-day disaster to a close.

As the basis of the findings, the report appears to promote a backdrop of “how could they have known?” However, executive leadership should have considered events outside of “likely” to consider the other potential outcomes for snowfall that was provided by the weather service. In addition, the report does not indicate any involvement of the Governor or his senior staff during the evaluation of the incident or the initial response to the event – it appears to have fallen completely on VDOT and VSP.

The lessons learned are clear: 1) assemble your leadership team early and often, and stay fully engaged at the highest levels; 2) prepare for events that are outside

the middle range of a forecast by an outside weather service and permit the agencies to over-plan with pre-disposition of resources – make sure that you have contingency plans; 3) prepare for all forms of communications to the Commonwealth and take an active role in making sure that all potential drivers know to stay off the road; 4) don't wait to declare a state emergency after an event when additional, pre-positioned resources can greatly improve outcomes and account for contingencies, providing necessary relief for motorists and allowing roads to be cleared more quickly.

While this storm represented some challenges and the unforeseen nature of the force of the storm provided a series of unfortunate events, there were several opportunities to mitigate the impact of the event had critical choices and decisions been made in a timely manner. The good news resulting from this event was several changes in protocols and procedures – starting with sustained and direct involvement of the Governor – during the three consequent weekends following this event where a state emergency was declared in preparation of significant snow events.

We appreciate the great work that VDOT, VSP and VDEM has provided the Commonwealth during the responses to the three state emergencies for weather, when given the support and resources they requested, and the many other opportunities we have had to observe their hard work, dedication and expertise.

The after-action report is attached for your information, and this report will be made available to the public and media on VDOT's web site at www.VirginiaDOT.org.

W. Sheppard Miller III
Secretary of Transportation

Robert Mosier
Secretary of Public Safety