North Dakota Public Safety Subcabinet

Governor Kelly Armstrong



Governor's Emergency Exercise, SEOC | 2025

Governor Kelly Armstrong has focused in on several key government functions, establishing subcabinets to dig deeper and create positive change. One of these is the Public Safety Subcabinet.

The Public Safety Subcabinet launched an effort to discover breadth and depth of problems facing the public safety sector. Alongside Legislative interest, the Subcabinet separately validated that Fire and EMS were areas needing attention. Amid this early discovery were items impacting the Emergency Management domain, so a third area of focus was added.

The Subcabinet then further split into taskgroups, tackling each of the three areas with various state partners, local, and association representation. Each taskgroup underwent a similar general format: discover, articulate, and solution.

Chair Roz Leighton | Gov's Office Chief of Staff

Vice-Chair Darin Hanson | NDDES Director of Homeland Security and Emergency Management

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STATE AGENCIES

Gov's Office Beth Simek, Connor Swanson

BCI Lonnie Grabowska

NDDES Darin Anderson, Debbie LaCombe, Alison Vetter

NDDOT Ron Henke

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NDFS Tom Claeys, Ryan Melin

NDHHS Chris Price, Tim Wiedrich

NDHP Col. Danny Haugen

NDIT Craig Felche, Eric Pederson

Insurance John Arnold, Matt Clark

OTAG BG Mitch Johnson

ASSOCIATIONS

Association of Counties

League of Cities

North Dakota 911 Association

North Dakota Emergency Management Association

North Dakota EMS Association

North Dakota Fire Chief Association

North Dakota Sheriff's Association

North Dakota Fire Service – Solutions for the Needs of Today, Foundation for the Next 30 Years

Public Safety Subcabinet

The fire service is long-overdue for a system-wide reflection and adjustment. Individual fire protection districts have testified to the strain they face from shifting demographics, financial pressures, and increase in environmental threats.

Not wanting to assume from a state perspective, the Public Safety Subcabinet conducted discovery with chiefs across the state to better understand the diversity of challenges across population densities, geographies, and governing boards. Distinctive patterns emerged:

People

92%+ of ND firefighters are volunteer, 2nd highest in the nation. Volunteerism has declined while turnover has increased-causing significant operational difficulties.

Mutual Aid & Surge Capacity

Each department must maintain mutual aid agreements with each of the other 360+ departments. Locals are coming to expect state assistance, especially from the small rural jurisdictions leading large, complex disasters.

Training

No state training standard for firefighters means each department sets their own – causing disparity and sometimes enmity between jurisdictions.

Funding discrepancies and challenges underscore each of these problem areas.



North Dakota National Guard Red Card Certified Soldiers Deployment Alongside North Dakota Forest Service April 2026

Following discovery, the Public Safety Subcabinet has led several collaborative solutioning workshops to pressure-test solutions; ensuring those put forward are solving real, boots-on-the-ground issues and have as much buy-in from the fire service as possible.

LEGISLATIVE SOLUTIONS

Task	Purpose	Legislative Action
Statewide Mutual Aid Compact	Opt-out mutual aid compact for all political sub-divisions, easing administrative burden	Century Code bill
Clarify NDFS Authorities	Provide positive authority for NDFS to proactively coordinate wildland fire response	Clean up Century Code 18-02
Clean Up Red Flag / Fire Danger	Correctly assigns responsibility for fire danger rating, used in local declarations	Admin code clean up
Wildland Taskforce Fund and Supervisor Training	Dedicated funding to support activation of Wildland Fire Task Force Multi-year training to establish cadre of qualified leaders for fire response, allowing greater surge capacity	$250K NDFS Budget Request
Shared Record Mngt System & Learning Mngt System	Multi-agency system to track personnel, credentials, equipment, capabilities, and training certifications, with the ability to schedule training.	$290,000 (State, 1x & Ongoing Funds) NDDES and NDFA Budget Request

These solutions are only those requiring Legislative action. A host of other solutions are being explored and accomplished between state agencies and Associations with current funding and authorities.

North Dakota Emergency Medical System Brief; Problems & Solutions

Public Safety Subcabinet

The EMS is under extreme strain, especially in the rural frontier areas that make up most of North Dakota's geography and demographic. We worked closely with the Association and squad leaders in the field to better understand the breadth and depth of the current situation.

PROBLEM STATEMENTS

Single Response Type - Ambulance services are designed to respond to life-threatening emergencies, yet only about 6% of 911 calls involve truly critical situations.

Recruitment & Retention - Services are at critical staffing levels. Long on-call hours, low pay and burnout make it hard to maintain a stable workforce.

Billing - High fixed costs spread over few runs create financial strain and make services rely heavily on subsidies or volunteers. EMS reimbursements center on emergency situations, leaving many other response types unbillable.

Rural Training - Rare exposure to emergencies can reduce readiness and impact quality of care. Training opportunities are less available and more expensive per EMT in rural areas.

Areas across the state without a clinic or hospital means ambulances are often tasked with basic medical care, sending a $500K piece of equipment and two providers to check blood pressure in Billings County, for example. Because reimbursement is tied to transport, this type of 'treat in place' care is often considered unbillable.

Ambulance services are only reimbursed for loaded time. Meaning, a volunteer in Bowden takes a call from neighboring jurisdiction to the nearest medical facility – in Bismarck: 3 hours there and 3 hours back. The service is only reimbursed for the 3 hours there.



North Dakota Emergency Management – The Coordinating Core of an Increasingly Complex Public Safety Environment

Public Safety Subcabinet

"Emergency management is expected to hold the system together during crises, but too often we are trying to do that without the staffing, funding, or authority needed to fully succeed."

North Dakota Emergency Management Stakeholder



A250 SEOC | July 2026

Homeland Security and Emergency Management has expanded beyond disaster response to span the full mission lifecycle — mitigation, preparedness, and recovery. Emergency Managers coordinate across every discipline, leading through large technological, demographic, and environmental disruptions, all while federal funding has waned since 9/11 and public expectations have risen since Hurricane Katrina.

Emergency Management is often invisible, whether the program is thriving or quietly hollowed out. When it is working response cost-sharing is predetermined and bills are paid on time; plans carry past learnings forward so officials aren't answering for the same costly mistake twice; the right partners are brought to the table before a decision creates a downstream environmental impact; mitigation grants replacing aging pump stations and levees before the rains come and the rivers rise.

A program that isn't working looks exactly the same — silent — until a disaster forces the truth into view. By then, it's too late to have built the capacity that was needed, and the bill comes due in response costs, property damage, and lives.

It is well documented that natural disasters are becoming more frequent, complex, longer-lasting, and expensive. North Dakota averages two Presidential Emergency Declarations per year.

Limited Visibility

Emergency management is inconsistently understood — often mistaken for administrative support — resulting in unclear expectations and inconsistent backing as a core public safety function.

Coordination Challenges

Emergency managers convene, rather than command, resources across jurisdictions and disciplines. Uneven statewide alignment, governance, and authorities creates coordination challenges and inconsistent service delivery.

Limited Resilience

Staffing issues like turnover and burnout — nearly 75% operate alone — along with increasing mission complexity limit long-term sustainability, continuity, and the ability to proactively build community resilience.

The Emergency Management program is almost entirely federally funded. Extreme disruptions at the Federal level cause blockage and instability at the state and local level.

LEGISLATIVE SOLUTIONS

Task	Purpose	Legislative Action
Clarify emergency management function	Establish a statewide baseline for emergency management program capabilities through statutory guidance.	Update Century Code 37-17.1

These solutions are only those requiring Legislative action. A host of other solutions are being explored and accomplished between state agencies and Associations with current funding and authorities.