

COMMISSIONER RONNELL A. HIGGINS



DEPARTMENT OF EMERGENCY SERVICES AND PUBLIC PROTECTION

Good afternoon, Bonding Sub-Committee Chairs Senator Miller and Representative Napoli, Ranking Members Senator Hwang and Representative Piscopo, and distinguished members of the Finance, Revenue, and Bonding Committee. My name is Ronnell Higgins, and I am the Commissioner of the Department of Emergency Services and Public Protection (DESPP). Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you regarding the Governor's capital improvement budget for fiscal year 2027 for the Department of Emergency Services and Public Protection. With me today are various Department staff who are here to assist in answering any questions you might have.

DESPP is a complex Agency that is organized into six distinct divisions. Our operational structure is comprised of the Commission of Fire Prevention and Control (FPC), Division of Emergency Management and Homeland Security (DEMHS), Division of Statewide Emergency Telecommunications (DSET), Police Officer Standards and Training Council (POST), Division of Scientific Services (DSS) and the Division of the Connecticut State Police (CSP). It also includes the Connecticut Intelligence Center (CTIC), which is part of the Commissioner's Office. Although these Divisions represent diverse responsibilities, we are united by one mission: to answer the call and lead the way. DESPP is a comprehensive public safety system that brings together specialized expertise in law enforcement, emergency management, forensic science, communications, and training to deliver complete public safety service and solutions for the people of the State of Connecticut. This mission is guided by three strategic pillars: (1) Operational efficiency, efficacy and excellence; (2) Shared fiscal responsibility; and (3) Ethics and accountability.

As I progress through my third year leading this agency, I remain resolute in my commitment to advocate for investment in the infrastructure and fundamental needs of DESPP. DESPP oversees 75 locations and 874,674 square feet of space. With many of our buildings being built in the early 1900s, we continue to be challenged to maintain facilities and address backlogs of deferred projects. DESPP is a continuous operations agency- our doors do not close, and our staff are dependent on adequate facilities in which to conduct the lifesaving, emergency, and protective activities that are required of us. The Governor's capital allocation for DESPP continues to address deferred maintenance and capital needs across our diverse facilities and invests in providing the updates to our physical plant that are critical to our ability to continue to operate at the standard that is expected of us.

Capital allocations in FY 2026 have been utilized to begin to address these needs, and FY 2027 allocations will continue to allow us to invest in our most critical capital needs and ensure the continued operation of the agency and the State of Connecticut:

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State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC)

Funding was authorized in the biennium for improvements to the SEOC. These improvements have begun, leveraging both state bond funding and federal grant funding. Phase 1 of this project is fully underway.

Alterations, Renovations and Improvements

In FY 2026, DESPP completed 8 capital projects, many of them the environmental, planning, and design Studies required prior to completion of a major renovation. DESPP is currently operating more than 30 capital projects with funding authorized under the FY 2026 budget, and dependent on authorization for FY 2027. These projects:

- support continuous operations across DESPP's physical plants in the form of generator and HVAC system replacements;
- allow for various critical infrastructure improvements to both the Police Officer/State Police and Fire Training Academies, DESPP's two continuous operation, live-in training academies;
- advance environmental safety through the replacement of underground storage tanks past their end of life;
- begin the essential replacement of three of DESPP's State Police Barracks, making them accessible, prioritizing better evidence handling capabilities, and with a heavy emphasis on space to conduct community outreach and engagement; and
- fund the rebuild of the State Police Firing Range, a project that is more than a decade beyond its due date and will bring critical safety measures to this location.

Emergency Vehicle Operations Course (EVOC)

Currently, EVOC training for all police officers in the state occurs in the parking lots of Rentschler Field. The use of this venue is not a long-term solution as the scheduling of the training is predicated on availability of the venue due to events. This also does not allow for permanent fixture of any equipment and causes significant wear and tear to the Rentschler facility, as the facility was not built for this type of use. This investment will allow DESPP to site and build an EVOC course to ensure the safety of all law enforcement officers in the state and the public.

While DESPP has not yet utilized the \$5,000,000 allocation for an EVOC location, a location has been identified and is in the process of being procured by the Department of Administrative Services. DESPP anticipates utilization of this allocation within the coming year.

Municipal Grants for Unmanned Aircraft

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Due to staffing vacancies, implementation of this grant program has been delayed. It is anticipated that DESPP will operationalize this program within the coming year.

Grants in Aid (Nonprofit Security Projects)

The State Non-Profit Security Program has funded 362 projects totaling \$10,000,000 since its inception in 2021.

School Security

The School Security Program has funded 1,700 projects to 1,200 individual schools across Connecticut since its inception, totaling investments of \$55,000,000.

Connecticut Land Mobile Radio Network (CLMRN)

The Division of Statewide Emergency Telecommunications (DSET), with DESPP, serves as the central administrator and technical manager for the CLMRN, ensuring reliable, 24/7 radio connectivity for public safety agencies across Connecticut. DSET maintains the physical infrastructure of over 75 tower sites, manages the high-speed fiber backbone, and monitors the network from a dedicated control center to guarantee 98% statewide coverage and enabling seamless interoperability between local, state, and federal responders while providing municipalities with technical support and frequency coordination at no cost for system usage. This bond program funds critical infrastructure updates for the CLMRN. Key current initiatives include replacing two 1990s-era mobile units, upgrading to modern signal-jamming detection equipment, replacing antiquated microwave dishes and backup battery systems, supports the installation of new radio sites to expand network coverage, and adds heat and smoke detectors to improve safety at remote locations.

Statewide Monitoring and Notification System

This bond program will implement the State's first Real-Time Crime Center (RTCC). An RTCC is a centralized, multi-jurisdictional unit that supports law enforcement by using technology and intelligence to provide law enforcement personnel with real-time information during active incidents. These centers integrate surveillance systems, criminal databases, and other intelligence tools to enhance situational awareness and improve response times. The State of Connecticut does not currently operate a RTCC. Funding allocated to this purpose is being utilized currently and over the coming year to build dedicated space for the Center.

Mesonet System

The Governor's midterm budget proposes the addition of funding in FY 2027 for the purchase and implementation of the Mesonet network of automated real-time weather stations similar

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to the National Weather Service Automated Surface Observation System (ASOS) stations. This is a critical infrastructure need in Connecticut due to the federal decommissioning of 17 real-time rainfall gauges across Connecticut leaving large gaps in our ability to measure weather in real time across the state.

In closing, the bond programs funded above, and the program included in the Governor's midterm budget for authorization are essential to DESPP's ability to provide the life-saving and protective services that we are charged with ensuring. I would like to thank you once again for the opportunity to speak about the DESPP mission and its capital improvement needs. I welcome the opportunity to address any questions you have for us.