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SENATE BILL NO. 481

Offered January 14, 2026

A *BILL to amend and reenact § 44-146.18 of the Code of Virginia, relating to Department of Emergency Management; emergency services and disaster preparedness programs; inclusion of federally recognized tribes.*

Patron—Marsden

Referred to Committee on General Laws and Technology

Be it enacted by the General Assembly of Virginia:**1. That § 44-146.18 of the Code of Virginia is amended and reenacted as follows:****§ 44-146.18. Department of Emergency Management; administration and operational control; coordinator and other personnel; powers and duties.**

A. As used in this section, "federally recognized tribe" means an American Indian tribe within the present-day external boundaries of the Commonwealth that (i) is formally acknowledged by the Commonwealth to exist as a tribe as reported by the Secretary of the Commonwealth pursuant to § 2.2-401.01, (ii) is recognized by the U.S. Secretary of the Interior to exist as a tribe under the federal Federally Recognized Indian Tribe List Act of 1994 (25 U.S.C. § 5131), and (iii) has entered into a contract or memorandum of understanding with the Department of Emergency Management for assistance provided under this section.

B. The State Office of Emergency Services is continued and shall hereafter be known as the Department of Emergency Management (the Department). Wherever the words "State Department of Emergency Services" are used in any law of the Commonwealth, they shall mean the Department of Emergency Management. During a declared emergency this Department shall revert to the operational control of the Governor. The Department shall have a coordinator who shall be appointed by and serve at the pleasure of the Governor and also serve as State Emergency Planning Director. The Department shall employ the professional, technical, secretarial, and clerical employees necessary for the performance of its functions.

~~B.~~ C. The Department shall in the administration of emergency services and disaster preparedness programs:

1. In coordination with political subdivisions ~~and~~, state agencies, *and federally recognized tribes*, ensure that the Commonwealth has up-to-date assessments and preparedness plans to prevent, respond to, and recover from all disasters including acts of terrorism;

2. Conduct a statewide emergency management assessment in cooperation with political subdivisions, *federally recognized tribes*, private industry, and other public and private entities deemed vital to preparedness, public safety, and security. The assessment shall include a review of emergency response plans, which include the variety of hazards, natural and man-made. The assessment shall be updated annually;

3. Promulgate plans and programs that are conducive to adequate disaster mitigation preparedness, response, and recovery programs;

4. Prepare and maintain a State Emergency Operations Plan for disaster response and recovery operations that assigns primary and support responsibilities for basic emergency services functions to state agencies, organizations, and personnel as appropriate *and federally recognized tribes as appropriate*;

5. Coordinate and administer disaster mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery plans and programs with the proponent federal, state, and local government agencies, *federally recognized tribes*, and related groups;

6. Provide guidance and assistance to state agencies, *federally recognized tribes*, and units of local government in developing and maintaining emergency management and continuity of operations (COOP) programs, plans, and systems;

7. Make necessary recommendations to agencies of the federal, state, or local governments *and federally recognized tribes* on preventive and preparedness measures designed to eliminate or reduce disasters and their impact;

8. Determine requirements of the Commonwealth and its political subdivisions *and federally recognized tribes* for those necessities needed in the event of a declared emergency which are not otherwise readily available;

9. Assist state agencies ~~and~~, political subdivisions, *and federally recognized tribes* in establishing and operating training programs and programs of public information and education regarding emergency services and disaster preparedness activities;

10. Consult with the Board of Education regarding the development and revision of a model school crisis and emergency management plan for the purpose of assisting public schools in establishing, operating, and

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maintaining emergency services and disaster preparedness activities;

11. Consult with the State Council of Higher Education in the development and revision of a model institutional crisis and emergency management plan for the purpose of assisting public and private two-year and four-year institutions of higher education in establishing, operating, and maintaining emergency services and disaster preparedness activities and, as needed, in developing an institutional crisis and emergency management plan pursuant to § 23.1-804;

12. Develop standards, provide guidance, and encourage the maintenance of local and state agency emergency operations plans *and those of federally recognized tribes*, which shall include the requirement for a provision that the Department of Criminal Justice Services and the Virginia Criminal Injuries Compensation Fund be contacted immediately to deploy assistance in the event of an emergency as defined in the emergency response plan when there are victims as defined in § 19.2-11.01. The Department of Criminal Justice Services and the Virginia Criminal Injuries Compensation Fund shall be the lead coordinating agencies for those individuals determined to be victims, and the plan shall also contain current contact information for both agencies;

13. Prepare, maintain, coordinate, or implement emergency resource management plans and programs with federal, state, and local government agencies, *federally recognized tribes*, and related groups, and make such surveys of industries, resources, and facilities within the Commonwealth, both public and private, as are necessary to carry out the purposes of this chapter;

14. Coordinate with the federal government and any public or private agency or entity in achieving any purpose of this chapter and in implementing programs for disaster prevention, mitigation, preparation, response, and recovery;

15. Establish guidelines pursuant to § 44-146.28, and administer payments to eligible applicants as authorized by the Governor;

16. Coordinate and be responsible for the receipt, evaluation, and dissemination of emergency services intelligence pertaining to all probable hazards affecting the Commonwealth;

17. Coordinate intelligence activities relating to terrorism with the Department of State Police;

18. Develop an emergency response plan to address the needs of individuals with household pets and service animals in the event of a disaster and assist and coordinate with local agencies in developing an emergency response plan for household pets and service animals; and

19. Establish and maintain an Emergency Management Equity Working Group (the Working Group) to ensure that emergency management programs and plans provide support to at-risk individuals and populations disproportionately impacted by disasters. The Working Group shall include experts from (i) the Governor's Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and other state agencies; (ii) the public at large; and (iii) the private sector who have expertise related to at-risk and vulnerable populations and the threats faced by such populations during a disaster.

The Department of Emergency Management shall ensure that all such plans, assessments, and programs required by this subsection include specific preparedness for, and response to, disasters resulting from electromagnetic pulses and geomagnetic disturbances.

G. D. The Department of Emergency Management shall during a period of impending emergency or declared emergency be responsible for:

1. The receipt, evaluation, and dissemination of intelligence pertaining to an impending or actual disaster;

2. Providing facilities from which state agencies and supporting organizations may conduct emergency operations;

3. Providing an adequate communications and warning system capable of notifying all political subdivisions *and federally recognized tribes* in the Commonwealth of an impending disaster within a reasonable time;

4. Establishing and maintaining liaison with affected political subdivisions *and federally recognized tribes*;

5. Determining requirements for disaster relief and recovery assistance;

6. Coordinating disaster response actions of federal, state and volunteer relief agencies; and

7. Coordinating and providing guidance and assistance to affected political subdivisions *and federally recognized tribes* to ensure orderly and timely response to and recovery from disaster effects.

~~D.~~ E. The Department of Emergency Management shall be provided the necessary facilities and equipment needed to perform its normal day-to-day activities and coordinate disaster-related activities of the various federal, state, and other agencies *and federally recognized tribes* during a state of emergency declaration by the Governor or following a major disaster declaration by the President.

~~E.~~ F. The Department of Emergency Management is authorized to enter into all contracts and agreements necessary or incidental to performance of any of its duties stated in this section or otherwise assigned to it by law, including contracts with the United States, other states, agencies and government subdivisions of the Commonwealth, *federally recognized tribes*, and other appropriate public and private entities.

~~F.~~ G. The Department of Emergency Management shall encourage private industries whose goods and services are deemed vital to the public good to provide annually updated preparedness assessments to the

121 local coordinator of emergency management on or before April 1 of each year, to facilitate overall
122 Commonwealth preparedness. For the purposes of this section, "private industry" means companies, private
123 hospitals, and other businesses or organizations deemed by the State Coordinator of Emergency Management
124 to be essential to the public safety and well-being of the citizens of the Commonwealth.

125 ~~G.~~ H. The Department of Emergency Management shall establish a Coordinator of Search and Rescue.
126 Powers and duties of the Coordinator shall include:

127 1. Coordinating the search and rescue function of the Department of Emergency Management;
128 2. Coordinating with local, state, and federal agencies *and federally recognized tribes* involved in search
129 and rescue;

130 3. Coordinating the activities of search and rescue organizations involved in search and rescue;

131 4. Maintaining a register of search and rescue certifications, training, and responses;

132 5. Establishing a memorandum of understanding with the Virginia Search and Rescue Council and its
133 respective member agencies regarding search and rescue efforts;

134 6. Providing on-scene search and rescue coordination when requested by an authorized person;

135 7. Providing specialized search and rescue training to police, fire-rescue, EMS, emergency managers,
136 volunteer search and rescue responders, and others who might have a duty to respond to a search and rescue
137 emergency;

138 8. Gathering and maintaining statistics on search and rescue in the Commonwealth;

139 9. Compiling, maintaining, and making available an inventory of search and rescue resources available in
140 the Commonwealth; and

141 10. Periodically reviewing search and rescue cases and developing best professional practices.

142 Nothing in this chapter shall be construed as authorizing the Department of Emergency Management to
143 take direct operational responsibilities from local, state, or federal law enforcement *or federally recognized*
144 *tribes* in the course of search and rescue or missing person cases.