

March 25, 2025

Dear Chair, Vice Chair, and members of the committee:

I request your support of the Statewide Public Safety Radio Communication System Equipment Grants; appropriation bill, SF 2308. This bill will help sustain the aging ARMER system and help to support the equipment needs throughout the State of Minnesota.

As employed by the Stevens County Sheriff's Office. I currently serve as the Emergency Management Director for two counties in West Central MN. I have worked for Stevens County since 2008 and Big Stone County, since 2016. Employed by the Stevens County Sheriff, I serve as the Local ARMER System Administrator and sit on many regional and statewide Emergency Services Board committees. Through this work, I see firsthand the need for continued funding throughout the region and state.

Both Stevens County and Big Stone County were awarded funding through the State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2024-2026 Allied Radio Matrix for Emergency Response (ARMER) Grant Program. This funding will greatly affect the ongoing response level and interoperability capabilities between our emergency services departments. Continued funding remains a concern for many departments who were not funded, or the funding did not meet the overall needs of those who were funded. Most counties and departments do replace a small number of radios each year but are unable to replace what is needed due to the cost. There continues to be hundreds throughout the State of Minnesota who are in desperate need of funding for replacement radios.

On July 25, 2021, a 9 1 1 emergency call was made from the City of Clinton, in Big Stone County. The caller reported that the grain elevator was on fire. There were nineteen fire departments and seventeen other departments from multiple counties who worked together over a two-day response timeframe and communicated through the ARMER radio system. One of the initial requests that I received as the Emergency Manager was for a ladder fire truck. I contacted the Morris Fire Chief and relayed the request to the Stevens County Sheriff's Office Dispatch Center. The Morris Fire Department was paged out and they immediately responded to the call for help. They monitored the 800 MHz radio system from their fire truck as they traveled to the City of Clinton which is approximately 40 miles away. By monitoring the ARMER radio in their fire truck, they knew which route to take into the city and they were able to hear critical updates from the command staff. All responding emergency services departments were able to communicate over the 800 MHz ARMER radio system.

Days after the elevator fire in Big Stone County, Governor Walz, Congresswoman Fischbach, Senator Westrom and Representative Backer visited the location and heard concerns from local emergency services departments. A Fire Chief, who served as an incident commander shared his concern of how small departments are unable to replace aging radios. He explained that the money they bring in by fundraising, due to their small tax base, is used to replace equipment that is needed to fight the fires. This same Fire Chief testified requesting funding for the 2024-2026 bill.

Important points from the 2024-2026 funding are provided below.

- In the 2023 legislative session, ECN received \$4 million in general funds for a new statewide public safety radio communication system equipment grant program.
- A match of 5 percent from non-state funds was required.
- There were 178 entities who applied to this grant.

- There were 77 applications selected for funding.
- Over \$23 million grant funds were requested.
- The average grant funding request was \$130,000.

ARMER is the backbone of our public safety communication infrastructure. It's a priority to ensure that emergency services radios are up to date and able to provide interoperability for our EMS, first responders, firefighters, law enforcement and emergency management personnel.

This continued funding will:

- Maintain interoperability for our emergency response departments throughout the State of Minnesota.
- Allow funding for the emergency response departments who do not have an adequate funding source to replace the old or inoperable radios.
- Allow departments that may have an inadequate number of radios in their workforce to purchase additional radios. This will improve communication capabilities while enhancing responder safety when responding to a 9 1 1 call for help.

The following points provide awareness of the immediate need for funding throughout the State of Minnesota.

- Radios purchased years ago are at the end of support for the products. Replacement parts cannot be purchased for the failing equipment. Many departments have radios purchased over 12 years ago, and some do not have an adequate number of radios to safely manage a large incident.
- Many local government units can only provide funding through their levies. This has a direct impact on the local taxpayers and an increase in local levies. Small rural emergency service departments do not have the levy authority to fund radio replacements.

I greatly appreciate the work that you all provide, please let me know if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

*Dona Greiner*

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