Minutes of the Region 26 Council Board Meeting

July 28, 2026

Present:
Blaine County: Matt Eggert
Garfield County: Diana Hurlburt
City of Ord: Branden Stoural
Sherman County: Tom Bandur
Thomas County: Joseph Smith
Valley County: Theresa Petska
Law Enforcement: Joel Bergman
Tri-County Municipalities: Jay Meyer, Chairman

Absent:
Greeley County: Jordan Foltz
Loup County: Dave Larson
Wheeler County: Doug Pokorny
Range Municipalities: Paige Ryschon

Staff Present: Catie Larsen, Executive Director, Virginia Michalski, Office Manager Caden Johnson, Dispatcher Supervisor

Chairman Jay Meyer called the meeting to order at 5:00 p.m. Notice of the meeting and agenda were sent to all county clerks of each member county/municipality for posting and given in advance to all members of the Board. A quorum was present, and the Chairman declared the meeting to be a legal meeting of the Region 26 Council in accordance with the Open Meeting Act, which was posted and available for public review.

Approval of Agenda

The Chair noted the agenda had been amended. Motion and second were made to approve the amended agenda. Motion by Joseph Smith, seconded by Joel Bergman, to approve the July 28, 2026 agenda as presented. Motion carried by roll call vote. Ayes (8), Nays (0), Abstain (0).

Approval of June 30, 2026 Minutes

Motion by Tom Bandur, seconded by Theresa Petska, to approve the June 30, 2026 meeting minutes as presented. Motion carried by roll call vote. Ayes (7), Nays (0), Abstain (1).

Approval of June Financial Statement

The June 2026 financial statement was approved. Motion by Joel Bergman, seconded by Joseph Smith, to approve the July 2026 Financial Statement. Motion carried by roll call vote.

Ayes (8), Nays (0), Abstain (0).

Approval of July Claims
Board members reviewed July claims in detail. Discussion focused on GeoComm workstation license costs, address maintenance support, NRIN expenses, utility charges and grant reimbursements. The board reviewed a disputed Power Tech generator invoice involving overtime labor rates, service call charges, fuse replacement costs and follow-up visits. Members questioned whether overtime billing was justified for a non-emergency service call and directed Catie Larsen to seek clarification before payment. Claims were approved, with Catie Larsen authorized to determine payment of the disputed invoice after discussions with the Power Tech. Motion by Matt Eggert, seconded by Joseph Smith, to approve and pay the July 2026 claims. Motion carried by roll call vote. Ayes (8), Nays (0), Abstain (0).

Nomination and Election of Officers
Officer nominations were opened and approved by board action. Motion was made to reelect Jay Meyer as Chair and Tom Bandur as Vice Chair. Tom will remain in seat until end of his County Commissioner Term. Motion carried by roll call vote. Ayes (6), Nays (0), Abstain (2).

Public Comment
No public comments were recorded.

Deb Fischer Grant
Catie Larsen reported submission The Deb Fischer grant application was officially submitted. The final grant request amount was $409,000, which was less than the $415,000 target. The application included the server and other items, but a request for repeaters on fire trucks was excluded after Corey from Platte Valley advised it was likely outside the infrastructure scope of the grant.

Towers and Equipment
A heat alarm was triggered at the Ord Tower on July 2, 2026, due to a malfunctioning west air conditioner. Jay contacted Joe Wadas regarding the repair; however, it is currently unknown whether the replacement part has been installed. A second air conditioner was activated and, although it is less effective, is currently keeping the equipment at an acceptable temperature. Follow-up with Joe Wadas regarding the repair is needed. Caden also reported a loss of communication with Custer County through the Sargent Tower, while still being able to hear other parties. Corey with Platte Valley was contacted the following morning and reported that the issue was on the Custer County side. Corey subsequently tested the system and confirmed that the communication link is now functioning correctly.

Garage Update
The Board discussed plans to demolish the old Region 26 building in August, leaving only the existing concrete slab. Dave attempted to have the demolition covered by insurance;

however, the request was unsuccessful. The board will therefore proceed with the demolition themselves.

Unforeseen Resignation of Law Enforcement

A lengthy discussion was held regarding the unexpected resignation of the Wheeler County Sheriff and the resulting confusion surrounding law enforcement coverage and mutual aid. The Wheeler County Secretary contacted Region 26 Dispatch requesting law enforcement coverage from Garfield County. It was clarified that Region 26 Dispatch did not commit Garfield County resources or authorize Garfield County to provide coverage. However, the recording of the call will be reviewed to confirm exactly what was communicated. If the recording indicates that a dispatcher did agree to or imply that Garfield County would provide coverage, the matter will be addressed accordingly. The group emphasized that it is not the responsibility or authority of dispatch personnel to make commitments or decisions regarding another county's law enforcement resources.

The group discussed jurisdictional requirements and the importance of formal mutual aid agreements being in place before another county's law enforcement personnel provide coverage. In situations involving the sudden departure or unavailability of an elected law enforcement official, the Region 26 Executive Director should be notified immediately so appropriate coordination can occur. The Wheeler County Board remains responsible for securing law enforcement coverage for the county by contacting other agencies directly. The discussion also identified the need for single-officer agencies to have formal, pre-approved contingency plans or Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) identifying the chain of command and appropriate agencies to contact for emergency coverage. The group agreed that Region 26 should develop a policy addressing critical incidents and requiring the Executive Director to be notified immediately. Additional discussion addressed the importance of proper documentation, inter-agency relationships, and having established procedures in place to ensure continuity of operations during unexpected changes in agency leadership. Action items include reviewing the recording of the call from the Wheeler County Secretary, and researching sample MOUs from other dispatch centers for use in developing a formal contingency plan

Timesheets

A lengthy discussion was held regarding timesheets, overtime, and the budgetary impact of recent overtime and leave payouts. The board noted that 62.5 hours of overtime were paid during the current month, which was not specifically planned for in the current or upcoming budget. An additional unbudgeted vacation payout of approximately $7,400 was discussed. The board reviewed the current vacation policy, including the understanding that employees may carry over up to 120 hours, with excess vacation hours subject to payout. The need to clarify the official vacation and sick leave policies, including carryover limits and any differences between departments, was identified.

The board discussed the difficulty of balancing employees' need to use vacation time with staffing shortages and the resulting overtime. Management is working to reduce unnecessary overtime through scheduling adjustments, staff communication, shift swaps, and scheduling meetings and other activities during regular work hours when possible. It was emphasized that vacation time is intended to be used for employee well-being, while overtime associated with legitimate emergencies or unexpected incidents is considered necessary and appropriate. The focus will be on reducing preventable overtime rather than overtime required to maintain adequate coverage.

Scheduling practices were also reviewed, including the use of experienced staff on some single-person shifts while pairing less experienced employees with other staff during higher-call-volume periods. Until new employees are fully trained, some single-person shifts will remain necessary. The board agreed that operating short-staffed may result in some overtime but can still be more cost-effective than adding unnecessary positions, particularly when compared with the cost of additional salaries, benefits, and training. Retention of qualified employees was identified as a priority, with the understanding that maintaining experienced staff reduces ongoing training costs and supports overall operations.

Current staffing levels and hiring were discussed. The budget includes funding for more full-time employees than we currently have, while the department currently has eight employees and is actively working to hire additional staff. The board discussed operating with nine dispatchers for the time being and using supervisors or other staff for limited coverage during events or periods of increased call volume. Members emphasized that maintaining hiring standards is more important than filling positions with candidates who may not be a good fit, as turnover and training costs can be significant. Scheduling flexibility and employee accommodations were also discussed as important factors in retention and morale.

The employee handbook and leave policies were reviewed. The current handbook does not contain a provision allowing sick leave to carry over from year to year, although the previous handbook reportedly allowed a 360-hour carryover. The board discussed several potential approaches to sick leave, including establishing a carryover cap or providing employees with a full sick leave bank at the beginning of each year. The impact of maternity leave and the need to ensure the policy is fair and practical for employees were also discussed. The board agreed that additional review of other county and dispatch center handbooks would be helpful before making changes to the current policies.
The board also discussed the need to better account for vacation payouts and overtime in future budgets. A recent vacation payout of approximately $3,400 was noted as another expense that had not been budgeted. Members agreed that overtime should continue to be monitored and approved appropriately, while recognizing that some overtime is expected due to current staffing levels. The importance of employee retention, appropriate scheduling, and maintaining a positive workplace reputation was emphasized throughout the discussion.

Criminal Justice Board Report

The next Criminal Justice Board meeting is scheduled for August 7,2026.

Communications Center Report
Monthly statistics were reviewed. Caden Johnson reported activity from the Burwell Rodeo, noting high traffic-stop volume but no major incidents. He reported successful completion of the Certified Training Officer program and outlined training plans for a newly hired dispatcher expected to begin in October. The board discussed dispatcher staffing, on-call procedures, pager notifications, coverage during major incidents and cross-training efforts.

Director Report
Catie reported that the 2025 SHSP and EMPG grants have been officially executed and are now active. The Grant Award Notifications (GANs) have been signed, and the grants have been entered into the system. Reimbursement and project implementation plans are underway. EMPG funding will reimburse a portion of Alma's salary, with reimbursement submissions beginning soon. There is currently no match requirement for the 2025 SHSP grant, although matching requirements may begin around 2026. Most of the requested SHSP items were approved, including fourteen additional Flock cameras, which will be deployed on a shorter timeline. The camera deployment will be brought before the next law enforcement meeting for coordination.

Catie reported that grant funds are also being strategically utilized for the setup fee associated with a new FirstNet system, which will provide a redundant communication backup for 911 operations. ORION was asked to submit billing early to assist with spending down approximately $6,500 remaining on a current grant. The organization will initially pay the cost and receive reimbursement from the grant, with a recurring monthly charge to follow. The FirstNet system is intended to be a back-up for NRIN as the primary connection for 911 communications due to ongoing performance issues, including calls experiencing intermittent or broken audio. Matt with Applied Connective is obtaining quotes for a short-term fiber connection through Hamilton to the host sites in Columbus and Grand Island. The long-term goal is to establish a private, direct fiber connection, while the proposed solution would serve as an interim option.

Catie also provided an update on recent and upcoming training, publications, and regional activities. Grant funding was used by Virginia and Catie to attend G-191 training for PET Region emergency managers. Catie will also attend the International Association of Emergency Managers (IAEM) Region Seven training, with lodging expenses covered through grant funding. The latest regional newsletter was distributed to the Board and was prepared with assistance from Jess Pozehl, Deputy Emergency Manager for Brown and Rock Counties. The newsletter is intended to provide greater visibility into regional activities and demonstrate how grant funds are being utilized.

Administrative and financial updates were also provided. Local Emergency Operations Plans (LEOPs) for Garfield and Loup Counties have been submitted to the Nebraska Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), and a response is pending. Once NEMA responds, the Catie will work with the respective county emergency managers to obtain signatures from the county boards. The Ansley Tower purchase agreement was approved and signed, and the we are waiting on $10,000 payment.. Custer Public Power is also changing its policy regarding yard lights for private entities. Region 15 currently pays

$5.20 per month for two lights. Ownership of the light on the front corner pole will be transferred to the us, while the light on the transformer pole in the back alley may be removed unless the village agrees to assume the $2.60 monthly cost for security purposes.

Catie also provided an update on ongoing issues with the CodeRED. We had received an overage charge of approximately $1,200–$1,400, which was attributed to automatic National Weather Service alerts generated through the system configuration recommended by CodeRED. The charge was successfully disputed and waived. We are waiting on transition to CodeRED's new location-based weather alert format, which is intended to prevent similar overages. Catie will contact CodeRED for an update and determine whether GPS locations need to be removed to prevent future charges. A grant application has also been submitted for an alternative emergency notification program. The application has passed the Subject Matter Expert review and is awaiting final approval. We currently have a one-year contract with CodeRED, which provides an opportunity to change providers if the alternative program is approved and funded.

The potential discontinuation of Frontier's copper telephone lines was discussed. We currently maintain one remaining Frontier line at the Sheriff's Office in Ord at a cost of more than $200 per month. The line was intended to support a backup dispatch station; however, the backup station is not fully functional because two other lines were previously disconnected. The board discussed whether the approximately $2,400 annual expense is justified when Custer County is available as a backup.

The board generally agreed that discontinuing the unused Frontier line should be considered as a cost-saving measure. Catie will place discontinuation of the Frontier phone line on the next meeting agenda for formal consideration

Executive Session

A motion regarding personnel matters was made by Theresa Petska and seconded by Joseph Smith. Vote carried by roll call vote. Ayes (8), Nays (0), Abstain (0).

Motion by Theresa Petska, seconded by Matt Eggert, to exit executive session and return to open session at 10:19 with no action made. Vote: Ayes (8), Nays (0), Abstain (0).

Board returned out of executive session. Motion was made by Theresa Petska to increase the Executive Director's hourly wage to $32.00 per hour, effective July 1, 2026, and to authorize payment of the wage retroactive to that date, seconded by Matt Eggert. Vote: Ayes (8), Nays (0), Abstain (0).

Next Meeting

The next regular meeting was scheduled for August 25, 2026 at 7:00PM.

Adjournment

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned.

Respectfully submitted,

Catie Larsen, Executive Director

Approved by the Region 26 Council:

Chairman ______________________________ Date ___________