

RURAL EMERGENCY SERVICES IN IMMEDIATE JEOPARDY

We live in a push-button/turn the dial world. We are accustomed to making a call and our wish is granted. But what would happen if we were to dial 911 and no one came?

What strategies can Wisconsin use to recruit and retain fire and EMS volunteers?

Rural America is known for its independent, self-sufficient life style. To provide many necessary services most rural areas depend largely on their own natural resources: the volunteers. However, with our rapidly increasing responsibilities and requirements, it is becoming more and more difficult to provide quality life-saving services through volunteerism. And yet, these services are not only needed, they are mandated. Chapters 60.55 and 60.565 Wisconsin Statutes tell us exactly what is expected to be available. In part, they state, "The Town Board shall provide for fire protection for the town." Similar language pertains to ambulance service.

To help put the real problem in perspective I contacted Hillsboro Town Chairman, James Stekel. He reaffirmed that it is indeed a challenge to keep both the fire department and the ambulance staffed, and it is one of his greatest current concerns. He shared that he has talked to EMTs to see what could be done to

attract more personnel and they assured him that for them, it was not the pay. They stressed that it is the reward of often making the difference in a life and a dedication to community service that keeps them on the job.

Continuing on the interview mindset, I contacted Fireman John Rick to get his perspective on the situation. Like the EMTs, he confirmed that the real reason he is a member of the fire department is his love of “doing something for someone.” He also stated that in his opinion one of the reasons for the shortage is the commitment necessary to become qualified, particularly the many hours of training for both the EMTs and firemen. Another difficulty which he found sometime arises is having a job at a location other than the area served by that fire department and not being available when needed ... or on a job where they are not free to leave when there is a fire emergency.

Firemen typically undergo at least 60 hours of training. EMTs will have at least 120 to 150 hours. This is onsite training. It cannot be accomplished online. In addition, they will probably spend double that studying. Both positions require good physical condition. One EMT stated that the hardest part of her job was moving heavy persons.

Because of the shortage of qualified, trained staff, about a third of the rural Emergency Medical Services are in immediate operational jeopardy, according to the National Rural Health Association Policy Brief. This is affecting about 57

million of the total people nationwide who on the average, tend to be older, sicker and poorer than their urban counterparts. This is the challenge our Towns are facing.

We must put in place options to attract qualified, dedicated personnel to provide these life-saving services. We need to make this investment now, or we will pay dearly both financially and in lack of services later. Some very worthwhile proposals to consider are the Legislative Priorities supported by the Wisconsin Towns Association Lobbying Team:

- Allowing for towns to fund EMS using the same options available to fund fire protection under 60.55(2)
- Providing an income tax credit for volunteer fire/EMS.
- Provide a tax credit for unreimbursed volunteer fire/EMS personnel expenses.
- Provide a college tuition reimbursement for volunteer fire/EMS.
- Provide a business tax incentive for employers who allow the volunteer fire/EMS personnel to leave their work to answer emergency calls.

Some of the smaller rural areas are partnering with a neighboring town in order to cover staffing and equipment shortages. In addition to these proposals, an effective tool is education. Although there is an 18 year old requirement for EMS, a presentation in our high schools would educate students on the need and ignite an interest, just as taking the blood bank to the local high school resulted in record donations by the students. There is

already a program for Junior Firemen, open to both girls and boys, and hopefully will generate long term benefits. Making prospective volunteers aware of the need may be an important step in recruitment. Using local radio and TV spots, social media and a website could generate a useful response. The National Volunteer Fire Council has a "Make Me A Firefighter" program which offers several free tools to meet specific needs.

Most of our dedicated personnel will say that they would perform these services whether or not they were well compensated. However, we must take into consideration the commitment required and in order to make these positions more attractive it may be necessary to offer worthwhile incentives. The town board has the authority to levy taxes to pay for these services. They may also determine the amount of fees assessed to help keep the programs afloat. Every town is very aware of keeping taxes affordable, and needs to explore the availability of grants.

It is indeed a challenging time, and the programs that were designed to rescue are now in need of rescue themselves, but the ingenuity of rural towns has always triumphed, and we have no doubt that once again they will prevail.

REFERENCES

1. Wisconsin Statutes 60.55 60.565 (1)
2. Personal Interview, James F. Stekel, Chairman, Hillsboro Township
3. Personal Interview, John Rick, Fireman
4. National Rural Health Association Policy Brief
Retrieved from
<http://www.ruralhealthweb.org/NRHA/Advocacy/Policy%documents>
5. 2019-2020 Legislative Priorities [Wisconsin Towns Association](#)
6. Wisconsin Statutes 60.55 (2)