



EMERGENCY RESPONSE SERVICES COMMITTEE

Wednesday, August 20, 2025
Roughrider Room, State Capitol
Bismarck, North Dakota

Representative Jim Grueneich, Chairman, called the meeting to order at 9:30 a.m.

Members present: Representatives Jim Grueneich, Jayme Davis, Clayton Fegley, Pat D. Heinert, Dawson Holle, Karen Karls, Donald W. Longmuir, Dennis Nehring, Todd Porter; Senators Josh Boschee, Greg Kessel, Diane Larson, Donald Schaible

Member absent: Senator Dale Patten

Others present: Travis Bateman, Badlands Search and Rescue; Tim Blasl, North Dakota Hospital Association; Chris Estes and Charles Russell, Dickey County; Dennis Goebel and Jessica West, Southwest Healthcare Services; Rick Schreiber, Arnegard Fire Department

See [Appendix A](#) for additional persons present.

Mr. Casey A. Orvedal, Counsel, Legislative Council, presented a memorandum entitled [Supplementary Rules of Operation and Procedure of the North Dakota Legislative Management](#).

VOLUNTEER EMERGENCY RESPONDER RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION STUDY

Mr. Orvedal presented a memorandum entitled [Volunteer Emergency Responder Recruitment and Retention - Background Memorandum](#).

Mr. Doug Nelson, State Fire Marshal, Insurance and Securities Department, provided information ([Appendix B](#)) regarding an overview of fire service in the state. He noted:

- 357 fire departments exist in the state, down from a high of 373 in 2018.
- There are roughly 7,434 volunteer firefighters and 714 career firefighters in the state.
- Of the fire departments in the state, 334 are staffed by volunteer firefighters, 14 are staffed by a mix of volunteer and career firefighters, and 9 are staffed by career firefighters.
- Each year about 6 percent of firefighter positions are vacant, which amounts to approximately 500 open positions.
- The number of fire incidents increased from 1,972 in 2014, to 3,078 in 2024.

In response to questions from committee members, Mr. Nelson noted:

- Each fire department sets its minimum amount of training for firefighters, the state does not set a minimum level of training for firefighters.
- As compared to 10 years ago, more fire departments are reporting the number of incidents to which the department responds, which has contributed to the increase in the number of fires reported over the last 10 years.

- A firefighter position is considered vacant when a fire department has firefighter gear available but there is not an individual to fill the position.
- The Insurance Services Office (ISO) assigns a fire department a classification from 1 to 10, with 1 representing the highest rate of fire protection. The classification is based on various categories, including the number of firefighters, water availability, firefighter training, and available equipment.
- 336 of the state's fire departments received an ISO classification of 9 or lower.

Mr. Christopher Price, Director, Emergency Medical Systems Unit, Department of Health and Human Services, provided information ([Appendix C](#)) regarding the status of emergency medical services (EMS) in the state. He noted:

- Ambulance services in North Dakota include 98 basic life support units, 15 advanced life support units, 5 industrial units, 106 quick-response units, and 6 air medical units.
- 75,999 of the 95,617 ground ambulance response calls in 2024 were in response to 911 calls.
- All advanced life support ground ambulances meet the standards required under the North Dakota Administrative Code for response times of under 10 minutes 90 percent of the time. Of the basic life support ground ambulances, 62.5 percent meet the standard.
- The statewide ground ambulance average response time is 14 minutes and 19 seconds, and 56.2 percent of transports result in a transport to the hospital.
- Over the course of the last 12 years, 10 ambulance services have closed, and 3 ambulance services have been added.

In response to questions from committee members, Mr. Price noted:

- North Dakota's scope of practice for EMS license holders is more expansive than the national standard.
- Some businesses do not allow employees to leave work for EMS duties during work hours.
- Generally, insurance companies do not reimburse an ambulance service if a patient is not transported to the hospital.
- There has been limited success recruiting individuals from other states or countries due to various reasons, including inconsistent training standards and higher pay in other states or countries.

Mr. Mike Sandy, Paramedic, Oakes Volunteer Ambulance Service, provided information ([Appendix D](#)) regarding the Oakes Volunteer Ambulance Service. He noted:

- EMS advocates have unsuccessfully attempted to advance legislation to classify ambulance services as an essential service in the North Dakota Century Code.
- The Oakes Volunteer Ambulance Service responds to 400 calls a year, of which 5 percent do not result in a patient being transported to the hospital.
- Although the majority of the Oakes Volunteer Ambulance Service budget consists of payments by insurance companies, the service also receives funding from state assistance grants, donations, and a three-and-one-half-mill county property tax levy.
- The Oakes Volunteer Ambulance Service has 3 full-time staff and 20 volunteers.

In response to questions from committee members, Mr. Sandy noted community buy-in is important to prevent individuals from being poached from one ambulance service by another ambulance service.

Mr. Art Hagebock, Emergency Medical Response Driver, LaMoure Volunteer Ambulance Service, provided information ([Appendix E](#)) regarding the LaMoure Volunteer Ambulance Service. He noted:

- The LaMoure Volunteer Ambulance Service did not receive the state grant to support EMS.
- Call volumes should not be considered when awarding grant funding because a service with less calls still incurs the costs associated with providing EMS.
- Private EMS often charge more money for the same service due to the lack of a bidding process.
- It is significantly more expensive for an ambulance service to send an individual for training in Fargo than to train the individual in-house.

Mr. Ken Wangen, President, North Dakota Fire Chief's Association, provided information ([Appendix F](#)) regarding the fire services in the state. He noted:

- The most critical issue facing rural fire departments is a declining number of volunteers.
- Many smaller cities have expanded in size without a corresponding expansion in the size of the fire department.
- Fire departments may be limited by the quality of city infrastructure, which prevents the department from having an ISO classification of 8 or lower.
- The cost to move the Carrington Volunteer Fire and Rescue from an ISO classification of 5 to an ISO classification of 4 would be \$2 million.
- Carrington Volunteer Fire and Rescue purchased a new fire truck in 2024 for \$650,000. The truck it replaced was purchased in 2001 for \$210,000.

In response to questions from committee members, Mr. Wangen noted:

- He considers Carrington Volunteer Fire and Rescue as fully staffed; however, per city ordinance the department is not fully staffed.
- Carrington Volunteer Fire and Rescue firefighter training consists of in-house training and fire school training.
- The department allows for online training for certain programs.

Mr. Chris Estes, Sheriff, and Mr. Charles Russell, Director, Division of Emergency Management, Dickey County, discussed emergency responder recruitment in Dickey County. They noted:

- A lack of affordable housing is one of the largest barriers to recruiting volunteers.
- A program to provide low-interest housing loans for emergency responders could lessen this barrier.
- When the population of a community increases, the need for emergency services increases.

Mr. Travis Bateman, Director, Badlands Search and Rescue, provided information ([Appendix G](#)) regarding volunteer search and rescue in the state. He noted:

- There is a clear need for volunteer first responders in the state.
- Other states have offered benefits such as property tax credits, income tax credits, and stipends to encourage volunteerism.
- A beneficial law change would be the enactment of a law prohibiting an employer from taking employment action against an employee for responding to an emergency as an emergency responder.
- Volunteerism could be incentivized by providing volunteers with subsidized health insurance, retirement credits, mortgage breaks, or property tax relief.
- The cost to attend a regional fire school is limited to the costs associated with lodging, food, and fuel.

In response to questions from committee members, Mr. Bateman noted the military provides several benefits to military members and veterans, many of which also could be provided to first responders.

Mr. Rick Schreiber, Fire Chief, Arnegard Fire Department, provided information regarding the Arnegard Fire Department. He noted:

- The Arnegard Fire Department provides services to an area of 212 square miles.
- The estimated cost to purchase a new fire truck to fight grass fires is \$268,000.
- The time commitment required for training is a barrier to recruiting volunteer firefighters.

In response to questions from committee members, Mr. Schreiber noted:

- The Arnegard Fire Department has filled 18 of 25 firefighter positions.
- A barrier to recruiting additional firefighters is employers not allowing their employees time off from work to respond to fire calls.
- The oil and gas industry has provided assistance during grass fires by bringing water trucks to aid firefighters.

Mr. Tim Blasl, President, North Dakota Hospital Association, introduced Mr. Dennis Goebel, Chief Executive Officer, Southwest Healthcare Services, to present information ([Appendix H](#)) regarding volunteer EMS in the state. Mr. Goebel noted:

- Household dynamics and generational changes have affected volunteerism.
- Burnout and mental health challenges make it difficult to retain volunteers.

In response to questions from committee members, Mr. Goebel noted:

- Volunteerism could be encouraged by allowing volunteer first responders to log hours spent volunteering and apply for scholarships toward EMS education.
- The camaraderie and culture of an EMS unit is an important tool in recruiting and retaining volunteers.
- Providing compensation for lost hours at an EMS member's primary job could increase the number of people joining EMS.

Mr. Goebel introduced Ms. Jessica West, Manager, Emergency Medical Services, Southwest Healthcare Services. Ms. West provided information regarding the ambulance service in the southwest portion of the state. She noted:

- The Bowman Ambulance Squad has 5 full-time employees, 4 active volunteers, and 11 inactive volunteers and covers 1,500 square miles.
- The ambulance service in the southwest portion of the state is struggling to find volunteers and is on the brink of closure.
- The biggest issue facing EMS staffing is compensation for personnel. The current staff reimbursement amount per call is insufficient.
- Recruiting EMS personnel has become increasingly difficult in part due to the amount of training and education required to become and remain licensed.

In response to questions from committee members, Ms. West noted:

- The recent change to state grant requirements has made it cumbersome to fill out the required information.
- The public is not aware of the positions within and services provided by EMS entities.

- The Bowman Ambulance Squad has engaged in outreach events, including events at local schools to increase public awareness.

Mr. Mark Reinhart, Ambulance Tax District Board Chairman, McVile Community Ambulance Service, provided information ([Appendix I](#)) regarding the McVile Community Ambulance Service. He noted:

- Fewer individuals are willing to provide volunteer ambulance services.
- Compensation, insurance, and security are driving factors when recruiting individuals to provide ambulance services.
- The starting rate for drivers for the McVile Community Ambulance Service is \$7 per hour when on call.
- The number of available staff for the ambulance service is limited because staff must live within 10 minutes of the ambulance building.
- The community voted to establish a tax district for the benefit of the ambulance service. The taxes raised by this district have been vital in keeping the ambulance service operational.

In response to questions from committee members, Mr. Reinhart noted the McVile Community Ambulance Service has sufficient funding for education, but it is difficult to find individuals willing to relocate to McVile and complete the education training program.

Mr. Corey Johnson, Board Member, North Dakota Emergency Medical Services Association, provided information regarding EMS in the state. He noted:

- Recruitment and retention of emergency responders is a complex issue that cannot be solved through a single approach.
- Volunteering in EMS requires hundreds of hours of college-level education and a significant time commitment.
- Williams County levies a sales tax to support first responders. A portion of the funds is used to provide first responders counseling services.
- EMS agencies are burdened with increased costs due to reimbursement levels that have not kept pace with inflation.

In response to questions from committee members, Mr. Johnson noted:

- Ambulance services have partnered successfully with the Department of Career and Technical Education to train emergency responders.
- Some ambulance services have used online education outreach programs to educate students on EMS.

Mr. Brian Paulson, Fire Chief, Jamestown Rural Fire District, provided information ([Appendix J](#)) regarding the Jamestown Rural Fire District. He noted:

- The Jamestown Rural Fire District has 30 members on the department roster.
- A way to improve the finances of a fire district would be to raise the initial property tax mill rate for fire districts from 5 to up to 10 mills, and raise the maximum voter approved mill rate from 13 to 15 mills.

COMMITTEE DISCUSSION

The committee reviewed and discussed issuing requests for proposals for a study of ambulance service providers and a study of the evolving fire service needs of the state. Committee members noted it is important to seek information from individuals who have left positions in EMS to understand their motives for leaving and to seek information from individuals who have not served in EMS positions to understand why fewer individuals are drawn to the field.

It was moved by Senator Schaible, seconded by Senator Boschee, and carried on a roll call vote that the committee request approval from the Chairman of the Legislative Management to issue a request for proposals for consulting services to undertake a survey of EMS providers in relation to the committee's study of delinquent billing reimbursement. Representatives Grueneich, Davis, Fegley, Heinert, Holle, Karls, Longmuir, Nehring, and Porter and Senators Boschee, Kessel, Larson, and Schaible voted "aye." No negative votes were cast.

It was moved by Senator Schaible, seconded by Representative Heinert, and carried on a roll call vote that the Legislative Council staff prepare a request for proposals for consulting services for the committee's study of the evolving fire service operational and response needs of the state for the committee to consider at its next meeting. Representatives Grueneich, Davis, Fegley, Heinert, Holle, Karls, Longmuir, Nehring, and Porter and Senators Boschee, Kessel, Larson, and Schaible voted "aye." No negative votes were cast.

Mr. Nelson provided information ([Appendix K](#)) regarding the study of the evolving fire service operational and response needs of the state. He noted:

- The state has seen an increased number of longer duration fire response incidents.
- To improve fire response, it is important to coordinate between the state and local jurisdictions.

The committee discussed volunteer recruitment and retention in the state. Committee members noted:

- Many rural EMS districts service a large land area and it is difficult for the ambulance services to meet the response times required under the North Dakota Administrative Code.
- Other methods of delivering EMS may be available in addition to the traditional ambulance model.
- It is important to educate EMS staff to allow staff to move into higher positions in the ambulance service.

No further business appearing, Chairman Grueneich adjourned the meeting at 4:24 p.m.

Keith Mantz
Fiscal Analyst

Casey Orvedal
Counsel

ATTACH:11