



EMERGENCY RESPONSE SERVICES COMMITTEE

Wednesday, February 25, 2026
Roughrider Room, State Capitol
Bismarck, North Dakota

Representative Jim Grueneich, Chairman, called the meeting to order at 9:59 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, Dale Patten, Donald Schaible

Members absent: None

Others present: Senator Brad Bekkedahl, member of the Legislative Management Robert Finn,* Matrix Consulting Group; William Holahan,* Montana Public Employee Retirement Administration; Matt Zavadsky* and Steve Wirth,* PWW Advisory Group

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

**Attended remotely*

It was moved by Representative Longmuir, seconded by Senator Boschee, and carried on a voice vote that the minutes of the December 17, 2025, meeting be approved as distributed.

VOLUNTEER EMERGENCY RESPONDER RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION STUDY

Mr. William Holahan, Executive Director, Montana Public Employee Retirement Administration, presented information ([Appendix B](#)) regarding the Montana Volunteer Firefighters' Compensation Act retirement plan.

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

- Montana does not provide credit for years of volunteer service completed before a volunteer's department joins the Montana Volunteer Firefighters' Compensation Act retirement plan.
- The plan is available only to firefighters and is not available to emergency medical services (EMS) personnel.
- A minimum Insurance Services Office level is not required for a department to participate in the retirement plan.
- Anecdotal evidence indicates improved retention of volunteer firefighters, especially among firefighters in their twenties.

Mr. Tim Wahlin, Chief of Injury Services, Workforce Safety and Insurance, presented information ([Appendix C](#)) regarding insurance benefits for volunteer emergency responders. He noted:

- All volunteer firefighters in the state are provided insurance benefits by Workforce Safety and Insurance (WSI).
- The amount of an individual's insurance benefits are based on an individual's covered wages during the year.

- The proposed new section of the North Dakota Century Code would set a baseline amount of a volunteer's covered wage at \$30,000 per year.

In response to questions from committee members, Mr. Wahlin noted WSI offers agencies the ability to purchase insurance coverage for volunteer members.

Mr. Jason Olson, Firefighter, Oakes Fire Department, presented information regarding the requirements and challenges faced by small fire departments. He noted:

- Issues between the state and local fire departments often are rooted in communication breakdowns.
- State law prevents the purchase of food, water, and other items using the department's general fund.

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

- When funds enter the department's general fund, the funds are considered taxpayer funds, regardless of the source of the funds and to properly separate funding sources the department must create an independent fund.
- Small fire departments may face bookkeeping challenges when administering multiple funds.

Mr. Matt Clark, State Fire Marshal, Insurance Department, presented information ([Appendix D](#)) regarding the duties of the State Fire Marshal's office. He noted:

- Building culture by making firefighters feel like a part of the department is key for recruitment and retention.
- Investment in local training reduces the amount of travel time required of firefighters.

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

- Local fire departments can contact the State Fire Marshal's office to pose inquiries and receive information.
- The State Fire Marshal's office can support local fire departments by identifying matching dollars for federal funds.

Mr. Rick Schreiber, Fire Chief, Arnegard Fire Department, presented information ([Appendix E](#)) regarding volunteer firefighter recruitment and retention.

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

- Offering grants and scholarships for firefighter and EMS training would reduce financial strain on firefighters while they complete training.
- Increasing the number of remote training options for firefighters could reduce barriers to recruiting and retaining firefighters.
- Fire chiefs may be in support of diverting 5 percent of insurance premium tax funds to provide long-term benefits to firefighters.
- Increased funding for training could be used to train firefighters on newer equipment.

COMMENTS FROM INTERESTED PERSONS

Mr. Ken Wangen, President, North Dakota Fire Chief's Association, presented information regarding fire department funds and the insurance premium tax. He noted:

- Regardless of the source of the funds, when funds are deposited in a political subdivision account, the money is considered public funds.
- The law is not clear on whether public funds may be spent on food and water if a department is sent on a long fire call.

- The North Dakota Fire Chief's Association does not support using insurance premium tax funds for a retirement program.

Mr. Art Hagebock, Retired Fire Chief, LaMoure, submitted information ([Appendix F](#)) regarding the challenges facing emergency services.

GRANT FUNDING FOR EMERGENCY SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Mr. Christopher Price, Director, Emergency Medical Systems Unit, Department of Health and Human Services, presented information ([Appendix G](#)) regarding EMS funding and grants.

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

- Starting this year, EMS districts were required to register with the state vendor registry to receive funds from the department and the process created a backlog of applications. Applicants will not be required to register again for future years.
- The department has not received specific grant guidance for the federal Rural Health Transformation Program.

DELINQUENT BILLING REIMBURSEMENT GRANT SYSTEM FOR AMBULANCE SERVICE PROVIDERS STUDY

Mr. Matt Zavadsky, Emergency Management Services and Mobile Healthcare Consultant, and Mr. Steve Wirth, Emergency Management Services and Mobile Healthcare Consultant, PWW Advisory Group, presented a final report ([Appendix H](#)) regarding a survey of ambulance service providers.

In response to questions from committee members, Mr. Zavadsky and Mr. Wirth noted:

- Mandating Medicaid and private insurance plans to cover treatment in place when there is not an ambulance transport is one way to help cover the expenses of EMS agencies.
- Revenue sources vary between EMS agencies and often depend on the amount of taxpayer revenue compared to the amount of fee-for-service revenue a department receives.

FIRE SERVICE REGIONAL RESPONSE MODEL STUDY

Mr. Darin Hanson, Director, Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, Department of Emergency Services, presented information ([Appendix I](#)) regarding efforts to improve public safety in the state. He noted the public safety subcabinet:

- Formed a specialty team to review the issues faced by EMS.
- Distilled recommendations for the fire service into five areas: statewide mutual aid, state mutual aid reimbursement, surge capacity, minimum training standards, and long-term state structure of public safety.
- Intends to present its recommendations at the next meeting.

Mr. Robert Finn, Vice President, Matrix Consulting Group, presented information ([Appendix J](#)) regarding the proposal submitted in response to the request for proposals for a fire service regional response model. He noted the team would consider the requirements of the study, examine other state models, and suggest legislative changes to implement the recommendations of the study.

It was moved by Representative Heinert, seconded by Senator Schaible, and carried on a roll call vote that the committee reject the proposal from Matrix Consulting Group. Representatives Grueneich, Davis, Fegley, Heinert, Holle, Karls, Longmuir, Nehring, and Porter and Senators Boschee, Kessel, Larson, Patten, and Schaible voted "aye." No negative votes were cast.

REVIEW OF BILL DRAFTS AND DISCUSSION

Mr. Casey Orvedal, Counsel, Legislative Council, presented a bill draft [[27.0063.01000](#)] relating to the definition of volunteer. He noted the bill draft adds the definition of volunteer to North Dakota Century Code Title 1.

Mr. Orvedal presented a bill draft [\[27.0062.01000\]](#) relating to designating service areas for EMS. He noted the bill draft requires the Department of Health and Human Services to provide service areas for EMS across the state.

In response to questions from committee members, Mr. Price noted for the department to effectively administer a program designating EMS as an essential service, the department would need to define the word essential.

Mr. Orvedal presented a bill draft [\[27.0053.01000\]](#) relating to special vehicle license plates for volunteer emergency responders. He noted the bill draft amends the law relating to license plates for volunteer emergency responders, volunteer firefighters, and volunteer search and rescue personnel to allow for two sets of plates for a household with two eligible individuals.

Mr. Orvedal presented a bill draft [\[27.0043.01000\]](#) relating to the volunteer first responder retirement plan. He noted the bill draft creates a volunteer first responder retirement plan based on the Montana Volunteer Firefighters' Compensation Act.

Committee members noted:

- The fiscal impact of the bill draft may depend on how prior years of service are implemented by the Legislative Assembly.
- WSI already covers line of duty injuries and deaths, and those provisions may not need to be included in the bill draft.
- Funds from the gaming tax are deposited in the General Fund.
- Interest in the bill draft addressing service time for past volunteer service.

COMMENTS FROM INTERESTED PERSONS

Mr. Orvedal distributed testimony ([Appendix K](#)) provided by Ms. Rebecca Fricke, Executive Director, Public Employees Retirement System, which requests a delayed effective date to allow for time to implement the bill draft relating to a volunteer first responder retirement plan.

Mr. Clark noted the annual certificate in the bill draft related to a volunteer first responder retirement plan could be combined with the annual certificate of existence already submitted to the State Fire Marshal's office by fire departments.

It was moved by Senator Schaible, seconded by Representative Karls, and carried on a roll call vote that the committee accept the report from PWW Advisory Group. Representatives Grueneich, Davis, Fegley, Heinert, Holle, Karls, Longmuir, Nehring, and Porter and Senators Boschee, Kessel, Larson, Patten, and Schaible voted "aye." No negative votes were cast.

No further business appearing, Chairman Grueneich adjourned the meeting at 3:54 p.m.

Casey Orvedal
Counsel

Keith Mantz
Fiscal Analyst

ATTACH:11