



WESTCHESTER COUNTY

EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES ADVISORY BOARD

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February 9, 2022

Hon. George Latimer
County Executive
148 Martine Avenue
9th Floor
White Plains, NY 10601

RE: EMS REPORT

Dear County Executive Latimer:

Please find attached the report and recommendations you requested from the members of the Westchester County EMS Advisory Board with regard to the state of EMS in Westchester.

During the past year, the Board surveyed all of the EMS agencies in the county, held discussions with various representatives of these organizations and worked with the Municipal Managers Association whose membership demonstrated strong interest in assisting the EMS Advisory Board.

We also garnered the interest and support of State Senator Shelley Mayer and State Assemblyman Steve Otis. Senator Mayer and her staff are in the process of preparing state legislation to help address this critical issue. We hope that state legislation will lead to recognizing EMS as an "essential" service along with other important mandated regulations.

We also wish to thank you for your leadership in recognizing the need to find a solution to the long developing concern about the lack of appropriate pre-hospital care in Westchester County.

We believe that we are on the precipice of finally solving a decade's long issue that has deteriorated rapidly during the Covid 19 pandemic. We are sincerely grateful to you for helping us get to this point and are prepared to support your efforts in the months ahead.

We look forward to meeting with you at your earliest opportunity to answer any of your questions.

Sincerely yours,

David Dawson, Chairman

Westchester County EMS Advisory Board

Westchester County Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Advisory Board

EMS in Crisis: Current Problems and Recommended Solutions

EMS systems throughout our nation face an immediate crisis. The problems leading to this situation have been building over the years, and have now been pushed to the point of crisis by the Coronavirus pandemic. This situation exists here in Westchester County, where staffing shortages have led to dramatic increases in mutual aid calls and increases in wait times for a responding ambulance. In 2021 over 7,000 requests for EMS mutual aid were received, a 58% increase from 2020. The intent of mutual aid is to provide support in exceptional situations, but it has now become a 20x per day occurrence. It is now common for 9-1-1 dispatchers to reach out to multiple agencies, sometimes 10-15 or more, to find an available crew to respond. This additional dispatch time adds significantly to response time delays. When someone is having a critical health emergency, and calls for an ambulance, time matters. A delayed response to a critical patient, can make the difference between life and death. The Westchester EMS Advisory Board has researched the factors contributing to the current crisis and is recommending both short and long term action items for your consideration.

Current Problems:

Many people are surprised to learn that EMS is not designated as an “essential service” by state or federal law, as police and fire service are. This has resulted in fewer revenue opportunities to support EMS operations, equipment, and staffing. A significant portion of EMS agency revenues come from private patient insurance or Medicare/Medicaid reimbursements, which are inadequate to cover EMS costs. Most EMS agencies do not receive any compensation for providing onsite medical assessment and care, only for transporting a patient to the hospital.

Low compensation, lack of benefits, and lack of career opportunities have created recruitment and retention challenges, which results in insufficient staffing to meet Westchester County’s EMS needs.

These staffing challenges also impact mutual aid capabilities. This results both in significantly increased response times to those in need of pre-hospital medical care and transportation, while also leaving the responding unit communities with limited coverage.

The Emergency Medical Services (EMS) system in Westchester County is quite unique. There are 50 agencies currently authorized under the New York State (NYS) Public Health Law, Article 30, to operate in the County of Westchester.

Primary EMS service models vary from independent, commercial, to municipal based agencies. Staffing models range from all volunteer, to all career, to a combined staffing model. Over the past 10 years the staffing models have shown a decline of full volunteer staffing, many agencies have adopted a combination career/volunteer model. As additional combined staffing models are utilized with the intent of resolving recruitment and retention challenges, inadequate agency funding challenges are created, including limited revenue opportunities. When the costs of

equipment, vehicles, supplies, fuel, maintenance, and a safe and secure facility are added, local funds can be quickly depleted.

Even without a requirement to provide EMS, some local municipalities, independent EMS or fire based EMS services have recognized the need for providing these vital out-of-hospital healthcare services. However, they are provided inconsistently and with few standards for level of care, service availability, and adequate response times or oversight. Providing EMS to all residents should be the responsibility of every municipality in a form chosen by officials in the home community (municipal, private, not-for-profit, district, etc.).

The key reasons that EMS should be considered required and essential is the emergency medical services system provides a public good that includes the following:

- a) EMS provides highly trained out-of-hospital healthcare professionals who respond to those who are sick or injured in their homes, workplace, or on our streets.
- b) EMS provides public health & safety services, especially during life threatening emergencies, providing timely and advanced patient care.
- c) EMS provides equal access to all residents.
- d) EMS provides early intervention health care.

In short, requiring at least a minimum level of uniform EMS service ensures that *all residents* receive these public health and safety protections, especially during emergencies, and have access to early intervention health care which will help provide better care for patients, assist medical providers at the hospital, and lower overall medical costs.

The need to continue providing what the general public certainly considers an “essential” service, even if the law does not, must include the establishment of a continuous funding stream to support ongoing operations. Third party reimbursements have not been sufficient to maintain the state of readiness needed to provide adequate out-of-hospital care. Medicare/Medicaid rates are inadequate to cover the costs of care, and if the patient is not provided with transportation, services are not eligible for reimbursement.

The EMS Advisory Board was approached by the Westchester Municipal Administrators Association (MAA) to collaborate on a common solution because they understand and share these concerns about providing vital pre-hospital healthcare to the residents of Westchester County. It is the intent of this partnership to educate locally and encourage legislative support to overcome this crisis.

Recommended Solutions:

Under Westchester County Law 223-b, the Emergency Medical Services Advisory Board (EAB) was created to: *“The principal function of the Board is to assist, advise, comment and make recommendations to the Westchester County Executive on matters related to the provision of emergency medical services in Westchester County.”*

Below are several short and long term recommended action items for your consideration.

1. Legislation:

- a. Enact State legislation that requires local municipalities to recognize Emergency

Medical Services, as an “essential” service. This would require a municipality to ensure adequate EMS services are provided to their communities, including service standards in level of care, equipment, personnel, response time, and quality assurance, coordinated through the Regional EMS Councils. It would also include a sufficient, sustainable funding mechanism.

- b. Support Federal legislation that recognizes Emergency Medical Services as an “essential” service, and allows for federal aid, grant funding, and improved Medicare/Medicaid reimbursement rates.
 - c. Request support from our state and federal delegation on behalf of the County Executive and Board of Legislators.
 - d. Consider the creation of regional or countywide EMS Special Districts as a funding mechanism.
 - e. Consider funding a shared services model that would allow for local consolidation and resulting cost savings. Although not an easy task, the model would help better utilize limited personnel in providing increased productivity hours, and decrease overall costs by reducing the enormous expense of equipment, supplies, and infrastructure.
2. Federal Support:
 - a. Expand the current DHS/FEMA SAFER grant program to further address inadequate staffing concerns.
 - b. Increase Medicare/Medicaid reimbursement rates, and allow reimbursement for non-transport services.
3. State Support:
 - a. Investigate access into an employee retirement system and participation in the NYS employee health insurance program.
 - b. Investigate the potential need to alter General Municipal Law (GML) to include emergency medical services systems in the New York State Length of Service Award Program eligibility.
 - c. Evaluate the availability and use of telemedicine services to defer callers with non-life threatening illness to a healthcare triage provider, with the goal of decreasing the need for EMS to respond when that level of care is not warranted.
 - d. Allow for alternate transport locations, such as urgent care centers, clinics, etc. thereby decreasing out of service times and keeping the healthcare services local. This would also help with overcrowding of emergency departments and decrease overall healthcare costs.
4. Public Education:
 - a. Support public education of elected officials and the public about the current status of EMS and the need for solutions.
5. Career Development:
 - a. Improve EMS staff compensation and benefits, including healthcare and retirement.
 - b. Develop additional EMS training programs to support new providers, and ongoing training opportunities to enhance advanced care.
 - c. Create a better career path for EMS staff in health care fields.

Conclusions:

Westchester County's EMS system is in crisis. Although the COVID pandemic exacerbated the situation, when the pandemic has abated, the identified shortfalls will remain. The immediate and long term needs should be addressed in order to create a sustainable EMS system county wide. Building a sustainable EMS system includes making the profession part of an attractive career path for the dedicated men and women who save lives every day. This path would help preserve current, and attract future, qualified providers who will be accessible and capable of responding to the out-of-hospital healthcare needs of the residents, workforce, and visitors in every municipality throughout Westchester County.

The EMS Advisory Board has recommended a series of actions we believe will make significant improvements. The Advisory Board, in partnership with the Municipal Administrators Association, are committed to working with you towards solutions that will benefit all Westchester residents.

