

# Training mandate trips medical workers

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By SCOTT WILLIAMS [swilliams@journalsentinel.com](mailto:swilliams@journalsentinel.com), Journal Sentinel

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The war on terrorism has created a learning curve for Wisconsin emergency medical workers, with up to 20% statewide expected to be unable to meet a new state deadline for training to deal with terrorist attacks.

Effective Jan. 1, the state Department of Health and Family Services was not issuing or renewing any paramedic or emergency medical technician license unless the applicant had completed a new anti-terrorism course.

The requirement will hold up licenses for employees in some fire departments, prompting fire chiefs and others to complain that a preoccupation with terrorism readiness is interfering with other duties.

Don Hunjadi, executive director of the Wisconsin Emergency Medical Services Association, said that as many as 3,500 otherwise qualified applicants could see their licenses withheld until they meet the new anti-terrorism requirement.

That would represent about 20% of the statewide force of emergency medical workers trained to help with traffic accidents, workplace injuries and other mishaps.

"Why withhold that ability -- and withhold it from the patient -- just because they don't have this terrorism training?" Hunjadi said.

State officials said they have not turned down any license yet, and they have granted two-month extensions to some applicants whose studies were already in progress when the new requirement was approved.

All affected colleges and hospitals have taken steps to include terrorism training in their curriculum, said Nan Turner, a licensing administrator in the Department of Health and Family Services.

"It shouldn't be a hardship for anyone," she said of the new requirement.

The state licenses about 17,000 paramedics and emergency medical technicians for duty with fire departments and ambulance providers throughout the state.

The terrorism training requirement was included as a provision in the budget-repair bill that Gov. Scott McCallum signed into law in July. Some state officials were surprised to learn of the new prerequisite for licensing emergency medical workers.

"No one knew it was coming," Turner said. "It just showed up."

McCallum could not be reached for comment, but spokesman Tim Roby said the measure originated in discussions about how to improve Wisconsin's anti-terrorism defenses.

Adequate lead time

Roby said there was no expectation that the change would create bureaucratic problems for would-be paramedics or emergency medical technicians. Local fire departments have had since July to adjust, he noted.

"The question may be, 'What have people been doing for five months?' " Roby said.

The requirement calls for four hours of classroom training on recognizing and handling anthrax and other agents, and avoiding contamination while helping people harmed during such an incident.

State officials have spent months planning the curriculum with the state's 16 technical colleges and other institutions, such as hospitals, where emergency medical personnel can get training.

All previous licensees renewed their two-year state licenses in June -- before the new requirement was approved -- in compliance with state procedures for processing all renewals at the same time. That means those people now have until their next renewal cycle in 2004 to complete the terrorism training.

But for newcomers seeking their first licenses or others hoping to get licensed at a higher level of training, completing the classroom work before Jan. 1 became a logistical problem -- especially considering that many schools did not even offer the terrorism curriculum when the law was changed.

Hunjadi estimated that up to 3,500 new recruits enroll in emergency medical training each year.

Last-minute scrambling

In Jefferson County, one Johnson Creek recruit without terrorism training raced to get a license application filed before Jan. 1. Another now must wait until the training becomes available at Madison Area Technical College.

Johnson Creek Fire Chief Eric Solberg said that although he welcomes terrorism readiness in his department, he is not happy about getting caught behind the curve.

"My only problem is how it was handled," Solberg said. "No one realized that this requirement was going to be there."

In the Milwaukee Fire Department, all emergency medical technicians are trained at Milwaukee Area Technical College, while paramedics go to Froedtert Memorial Lutheran Hospital.

Gary Miller, chief of department's Bureau of Instruction and Training, said advanced handling of hazardous materials already is standard subject matter. But he said MATC officials are developing a new anti-terrorism curriculum.

"It'll be interesting to see what they come up with," he said.

In Waukesha County, three neighboring fire departments have joined forces to provide anti-terrorism instruction to more than 100 emergency medical employees. The session for the North Prairie, Town of Waukesha and Wales-Genesee departments is planned later this month.