

## An Emergency Crisis

### Medical Volunteers Are Desperately Needed

Wisconsin State Journal :: Front :: 1A

Monday, July 31, 2000

Valeria Davis-Humphrey Suburban reporter

Emergency medical services across the nation are facing a crisis sparked by their record for providing excellent service on volunteer power.

"Recruitment of new volunteer members is probably the largest concern, not only of services in Wisconsin, but across the nation," said Don Hunjadi, executive manager of the Wisconsin EMS Association, which has 3,400 members. The number of licensed emergency medical technicians (EMT) has hovered around 16,000 since 1992, Hunjadi said. Of those, fewer than 4,000 are paid as full-time EMTs. The remaining 75 percent are volunteers, he said.

Some emergency medical services are offering a yearly or by-call stipend to retain volunteers, he said, which average about \$1,000 a year across the state. But the volume of volunteers who receive no pay at all has diminished by about 40 percent, Hunjadi said.

Not long ago, doctors went to the sick or injured. In the early days of cars, funeral directors served double-duty, using their hearses to transport accident victims. Fifty years later, emergency transport was assigned to county sheriffs driving station wagons.

"Emergency care outside of the hospital basically consisted of a fast ride," said Steven Wunsch, Middleton's Emergency Medical Services coordinator. Drivers weren't trained or equipped to do much more, he said.

Emergency care on-site and en route to a medical facility didn't really emerge until the 1970s, when the military honed a process for field care in Vietnam, Wunsch said.



[place an ad <<<](#)

“They created a system for their field medics which delivered care at the patient's side,” he said.

The federal Department of Transportation standardized the military's medical procedure into an 81-hour emergency medical technician (EMT) training program and the first nationally recognized training course was in Wausau in 1969. The next year, federal funding was offered across the nation for local training, dispatch systems and ambulances, Wunsch said.

Middleton, which formed its EMS department in 1977, was among the many communities that started offering medical transport, he said. The system worked so well, Wunsch said, it became a seamless addition to fire protection and an invisible link to hospital-based trauma care.

But medical advances and technology have pushed the basic EMT training requirement up to 140 hours, Wunsch said. To remain active requires a 32-hour refresher course every two years, along with additional training to be a paramedic or an EMS driver.

Even experienced volunteers can't find the time for continued training or have to choose which among several volunteer commitments they'll make. Like volunteer fire departments, EMS crews are losing their volunteers.

“Over the past 25 years, people have had less time,” Wunsch said. “Jobs are requiring longer hours and mandatory overtime. They just don't have the discretionary time to devote to that.”

Wunsch, who has been in emergency medical services for 23 years and a manager since 1985, began informally tracking why people were leaving when he took Middleton's helm six years ago.

The reasons included changing life priorities, growing job and family demands, time for medical studies and relocation, he said. Fewer people are interested in volunteering at all, while others don't want liability or disease risks.

Volunteers also get full-time jobs in medical service.

“The vast amount of people who do this as a professional or a volunteer have a passion for it. They're very, very special people,” he said.

So though volunteer recruiting has remained strong, across Wisconsin the average time trained EMTs are devoting to volunteer service is 2.5 years.

“Sometimes people under-estimate what they're getting into,” Wunsch said. “So we're spending a lot of resources on training people we may not keep.”

In 1994, Middleton had 53 trained EMT volunteers and during the past six years added 80 to the roster, Wunsch said. But they've lost 71 volunteers, leaving 62. That sounds like plenty, but it takes 63 people to staff three eight-hour shifts with three EMTs per shift for one week, he said.

“Obviously, there are going to be scheduling conflicts. It's impossible to cover the schedule around the clock,” Wunsch said.

“The biggest fear is that we'll have a service demand that we can't meet in a timely fashion.”

The increase in service demand is due to community growth as well as increases in calls for medical help regardless of a situation's severity, Hunjadi said. Of total calls, 50 percent of patients could be taken to a hospital by car. Another 40 percent have significant but not life-threatening injuries or illness. Only 10 percent of cases are life-or-death circumstances.

Facing the same challenge, communities across Dane County are supplementing their volunteers with paid staff.

**KNOWLEDGE  
IS POWER!**

Even when it  
has no other  
significance.



Exercise your  
brain and win  
prizes with  
madison.com  
and the Flying  
Zupan Brothers'  
Trivia Challenge.

Click here to play.

**madison.com**

**:: TOP JOBS <<<**

- Store Manager
- LPN/ MEDICATION SPECIALIST
- ACT Team Leader
- Production Planning

Oregon just added a fourth paid EMS position to its two-person staff, 66volunteers and full-time EMS Chief Randy Sellnow.

“It's happening all over the country," Sellnow said of the volunteershortage. “I don't think we'll ever get away from needing volunteers. But thetrend is toward combined staffing, which is pairing full-time personnel withthe volunteers.”

McFarland's EMS director Jeff Dostalek has a paid staff of three and SunPrairie's director Mary Polenske is one of two staffers.

DeForest is adding a third paid position to its two-person staff and 38volunteers, said EMS Chief Dave Arnold.

“We're interviewing for a third position and it's well needed . . . dueprimarily to the inconsistent availability of volunteers during the day.

With 6,500 residents, DeForest now logs two to three calls daily, up fromthat many each week 10 years ago, Arnold said.

Many employers can't releasevolunteers that often, he said, but some do.

EMS services in Monona and the combined Fitchrona crew, which servesFitchburg and the town and city of Verona, both have seven paid staffers.

In May, Middleton formed an EMS Commission, which is considering addingpaid staff there, too. Wunsch's directorship is the only paid position.

“Middleton is not alone in this," Wunsch said. “Many communities arefinding that meeting the demand for services is getting tougher and tougherand we're facing the increasing expectations of the citizens.”

In March 1999, the state Legislature approved a length of service awardspension program, which is a partially state-funded pension program forvolunteer medical service technicians and firefighters, Hunjadi said.Communities will get matching funds for setting up a pension that will pay\$250 a year for volunteers after age 60.

To promote retention, volunteers are partially vested in this fund after 10years and fully vested after 20 years of service, he said.

The Wisconsin EMS Association is planning a statewide recruitment processfor sometime in 2001, Hunjadi added. They currently gain about 2,000 people ayear, but also lose an equal number.

- Supervisor
- Sales Trainee
- PROJECT COORDINATOR
- LAN Administrator
- Clerk Typist Senior
- GENERAL MANAGER
- Orthodontic Assistants

**:: SERVICES <<<**

- [Subscribe](#)
- [Renew](#)
- [Sign up for EZ pay](#)
- [Temporary stop](#)
- [Account inquiry](#)
- [Delivery concerns](#)
- [Commend carrier](#)
- [Place a classified ad](#)
- [Media kit](#)
- [Digital file requirements](#)
- [Photo reprints](#)

