



Wisconsin State Legislature

FOR MORE INFORMATION
CONTACT: LUTHER OLSEN (800) 991-5541

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Study Committee Looks at Fire and EMS Services

One of the Joint Legislative Council study committees that convened last summer was charged with looking at how fire protection and emergency medical services (EMS) are provided around the state. The committee also worked to identify the issues surrounding the shortage of volunteer firefighters and emergency medical technicians (EMTs), especially in rural areas. They were asked to come up with ideas to meet the needs of full time and volunteer fire departments, including proposals designed to increase the recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters throughout the state.

The committee heard from volunteer firefighters, professional firefighters and emergency services providers. The firefighters identified a few key issues that they believe is contributing to the shortage in their field. They explained that volunteer firefighters often have to travel long distances and have to miss time at work. Training requirements for firefighters and emergency technicians were also identified as a barrier to recruitment. While the Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS) offers courses for firefighter certification and EMTs, the courses are not always offered at times that work for people with a full-time job and do not include the hands-on, department-specific training that firefighters said they need. These emergency services providers also explained that the state's staffing requirements, meaning the number of EMTs with varying degrees of training, makes it difficult to provide services, especially in rural areas.

The committee developed a number of bills and sent two letters to the WTCS and the Department of Health Services (DHS). The proposed bills would:

1. Create an additional endorsement and training for EMTs to allow them to administer intravenous medications and fluids. This additional endorsement is aimed primarily at EMT-basic credential holders, as the other levels of licensure already include this skill.
2. Require certified first responders, EMTs, and paramedics to renew their licenses every four years rather than the current law requirement of every two years.
3. Allow two or more cities, towns and villages to jointly create a fire protection district.
4. Expand how funds from the emergency medical services funding assistance program are used to allow funding for their use for first responder level training and continuing education costs.
5. Enhance the length of service award program that municipalities can provide for volunteer firefighters by requiring the state to double the amount deposited by the local municipality, up to \$500 per year.
6. Establish a refundable income tax credit for volunteer fire fighters, EMTs, and first responders.

The Joint Legislative Council must approve these bills before they can be introduced in the legislature.

In the letter sent to the WTCS, the committee recommended reducing barriers for firefighter and EMT training, particularly in rural areas. Those recommendations include: increased online training, maximized training at local fire departments and EMS providers, better communication between the WTCS, fire department, and EMS providers throughout the state. Finally, the committee asked WTCS to look into the discrepancy between the number of people who complete the required coursework and the number of people who pass the National Registry of Emergency Medical Technician exams.

While addressing the DHS, the committee noted that they heard testimony from EMS providers, who expressed a desire for flexibility from DHS in terms of licensing that would allow them to provide one level of service some days and another level of service other days. For instance, some ambulance services have EMT-intermediate staff available during weekday business hours, but EMT-paramedic staff on hand in the evening and on weekends. Currently, ambulance service

can only be licensed as an EMT-intermediate service because it cannot guarantee the higher level of paramedic service at all times.

Study committees are convened to tackle tough issues facing the state. Part of what makes study committees successful at generating ideas and finding solutions is the mix of people at the table. These committees are made up of legislators, staff from state agencies and citizens with real-world experience dealing with the issue. Citizen members tell the rest of the committee how things actually work, what challenges they face, and how they think a program or law could work better. I would like to extend a special thanks to one of those citizen members, Jodie Olson, the City Administrator from Berlin, for sharing her time and expertise with this committee.

If you have any questions about any of the information I have included or if you have suggestions on other topics or issues you would like learn more about, you may call my office toll-free at (800) 991-5541; write me at P.O. Box 7882, Madison, WI 53707; or e-mail me at: Sen.Olsen@legis.state.wi.us. You can also sign up for our newsletter at our website: <http://www.legis.state.wi.us/senate/sen14/news/index.htm>.

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