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STATE SENATOR • 17TH SENATE DISTRICT

Capitol Update By Senator Howard Marklein May 9, 2022

Celebrating Rural EMS Week and Our Neighbors Who Save Lives

May 15-21, 2022 is National EMS Week. The theme this year is “Rising to the Challenge” – a fitting sentiment especially for rural EMS departments. In our communities, our EMS departments are local, volunteer, neighbors who rise to the challenge with every call. They sacrifice their time and give of their talents to save lives.

As the State Senator for the 17th Senate District, I have been focusing on rural EMS and the unique challenges we face in our communities for the past several years. This week, I am reflecting on the work I have done on behalf of rural EMS as well as all of the work that still needs to be done. I will continue to rise to the challenge of removing obstacles and providing support for our communities.

You may recall that in the fall of 2019, I held four “Rural Volunteer EMS Summits” across the 17th Senate District. Nearly 70 EMS volunteers, representing almost 30 different departments, attended the sessions which were held in Lancaster, Darlington, Elroy and Plain.

Based on the feedback from these summits, I authored several bills, increased funding for the Funding Assistance Program (FAP) in the state budget and connected with the Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS) to share feedback about training for rural EMS departments. I spoke up when urban, paid paramedic services ignored the small, rural volunteer departments. I fought for the things my constituents told me that they need in order to serve our communities.

Unfortunately, Governor Tony Evers vetoed one of the most critical bills for rural EMS recruitment and retention. Senate Bill (SB) 89 would have made the National Registry of Emergency Medical Technicians (NREMT) exam optional for Emergency Medical Responders (EMRs).

One of the most prevalent issues I heard during my EMS Summits were frustrations over the NREMT exam. EMS personnel from around our state have told me this test is unnecessarily difficult, expensive, and often has questions that are completely irrelevant to serving the people of Wisconsin. A participant at the Darlington summit shared that one of the questions on this NREMT exam was: “What should the tire pressure be on an ambulance in the mountains of Colorado?” Another ridiculous question is – “What do you do in the case of a shark attack?”

The Governor claimed that this bill would lower standards. He is wrong. The Governor sided with big, urban, full-time, professional departments over our small, rural, volunteer departments that are struggling to recruit and retain volunteers.

Andy Chenous, the Service Director of the Argyle EMS sent the following note to the Governor in late January, encouraging him to sign the bill:

I strongly urge you to sign SB 89, which makes the NREMT exam optional for EMRs. This bill is incredibly necessary in this day in age to keep rural EMS agencies in business. If this continues to fail, as it has been started 2 years ago and failed, we will continue to lose potential members due to it. I am the service director of Argyle EMS and have 4 people who have successfully completed and passed all coursework in the State of Wisconsin Technical College System. With this being said our great state has already stated that these members are qualified to perform emergency medicine.

The way current law states these, already approved, members need to take the NREMT test in order to get a state of Wisconsin EMR license. NREMT is a third-party agency making money and hindering the care of the residents of Wisconsin. This way of structure will decimate rural EMS volunteer numbers if it continues to operate this way. We need this shot in the arm more than ever especially with COVID-19 which has scared many of the existing EMR's and potential new EMR's from joining.

Please help us help the citizens of RURAL WISCONSIN. This should not be a matter that big city departments even weigh in on as they do not utilize EMR's. We, rural Wisconsin, are the ones that need them and this is my voice. I speak on behalf of the 2,986 people in my jurisdiction which reside in Southwest Wisconsin comprised mostly in Lafayette but a small part of Green County as well. Thank you so much for your consideration, it is for the better of our state.

James Newlun, Director of Camp Douglas EMS recently informed me that the Kendall EMS Department has folded and this bill would have helped.

Donna Flannery was one of the last members standing at the South Wayne EMS Department before it closed and she has told me that this bill is a good idea. She and one other EMT were the only two members left in the end.

Lynn Kirschbaum in Glen Haven, Ray Ring in Plain and Raye Walz in Kendall have all supported this legislation on behalf of their communities. This is not a one-off fix. This bill would have mattered. I will bring it back in the next session on their behalf.

I have always been an advocate for rural Wisconsin. All too often, rural voices are overshadowed in Madison and Milwaukee. The issues that we face go unnoticed. I am grateful to our area EMS personnel for sharing the ways Wisconsin state regulations are preventing their rural departments from both recruiting and retaining volunteers. It is important for me to author this legislation and give our community first responders the support they need.

As we celebrate EMS Week, please take a moment to thank your friends and neighbors who volunteer to serve. Also consider whether you might be able to take on this role. We need you.