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## WISCONSIN LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

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# VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTER AND EMERGENCY MEDICAL TECHNICIAN SHORTAGES

Large Conference Room  
One East Main Street, Suite 401

July 26, 2016  
9:30 a.m. – 2:20 p.m.

[The following is a summary of the July 26, 2016 meeting of the Study Committee on Volunteer Firefighter and Emergency Medical Technician Shortages. The file copy of this summary has appended to it a copy of each document prepared for or submitted to the committee during the meeting. A digital recording of the meeting is available on our Web site at <http://www.legis.wisconsin.gov/lc>.]

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### Call to Order and Roll Call

Chair Nass called the committee to order. The roll was called and a quorum was determined to be present.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT: Sen. Steve Nass, Chair; Rep. Debra Kolste; and Public Members John Eich, J. Timothy Hillebrand, Gregory Michalek, Jodie Olson, Jeff Rickaby, David Seager, Jr., Dana Sechler, James Small, Jody Stoker, Jay Tousey, and Gene Wright.

COMMITTEE MEMBER EXCUSED: Rep. Jesse Kremer, Vice Chair; and Sen. Janet Bewley.

COUNCIL STAFF PRESENT: Margit Kelley, Senior Staff Attorney, and Andrea Brauer, Staff Attorney.

APPEARANCES: Senator Mary Lazich, Co-Chair, and Joan Ballweg, Co-Chair, Joint Legislative Council; Tom Engels, Interim Secretary, Bill Oemichen, Director, Office of Preparedness and Emergency Health Care, and James Newlun, EMS Section Chief, Emergency Medical Services Section, Department of Health Services; and Jeff Weigand, Assistant Deputy Secretary, and Carl Frisque, Fire Prevention Coordinator, Department of Safety and Professional Services (DSPS).

## **Opening Remarks**

Representative Joan Ballweg and Senator Mary Lazich, Co-Chairs of the Joint Legislative Council, thanked the committee members for their willingness to serve, and said that the topic of volunteer firefighter and EMT shortages is important for the state to address.

## **Introduction of Committee Members**

Chair Nass introduced himself and welcomed the committee members. Upon the Chair's request, members and Legislative Council staff assigned to the committee briefly introduced themselves. Committee members also briefly described their history as a firefighter or EMT, or their involvement in addressing the provision of fire and EMT services.

## **Presentation by Legislative Council Committee Staff**

### **Staff Brief 2016-02, Volunteer Firefighter and Emergency Medical Technician Shortages**

Ms. Kelley and Ms. Brauer, Legislative Council staff for the committee, presented an overview of the information that was provided in the Staff Brief. Ms. Kelley reviewed the scope that the committee is directed to study. Ms. Kelley also noted that while volunteers generally are not paid wages for their services, under the federal Fair Labor Standards Act, volunteers in public service positions may receive a nominal fee, including reasonable benefits, and expense reimbursement.

Ms. Brauer reviewed the statutory duties and authorizations for municipalities to provide fire and EMS response, and described the structure of the federal and state agency oversight of fire and EMT services. Ms. Brauer also briefly described legislation that was enacted in the 2015 Session relating to out-of-state EMS licensees and to reduced EMS staffing requirements.

Ms. Kelley gave an overview of aspects of rural areas in Wisconsin, including U.S. Census Bureau data from 2010, figures on rural and frontier classifications, geographic locations of Wisconsin Technical College System campuses and licensed EMT-level service providers, and driving times to reach emergency care in Wisconsin. Ms. Kelley noted that a federal study on the EMS workforce found no quantitative data indicating a national shortage of EMTs, though the report stated that interviews consistently reported shortages in rural areas and that the federal labor statistics do not include volunteers, which likely underestimate workforce demand.

A link to the Legislative Council staff PowerPoint slides is available on the committee's website at: <https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/misc/lc/study/2016/1498>.

## **Presentation by Representatives of the Department of Health Services**

**Tom Engels, Interim Secretary; Bill Oemichen, Director, Office of Preparedness and Emergency Health Care; and James Newlun, EMS Section Chief, Emergency Medical Services Section**

Mr. Engels, Mr. Oemichen, and Mr. Newlun introduced themselves and described the EMS Section within DHS's Office of Preparedness and Emergency Health Care. Mr. Oemichen presented data on the number of current EMS providers (over 600) and individual EMS personnel (over 16,000), and the increasing statewide call volume for 2013, 2014, and 2015. Mr. Oemichen also described the structure of the state EMS Board and its committees.

Mr. Newlun gave an overview of the curriculum hours that are generally used for each EMT level, and briefly described the use of the National Registry of Emergency Medical Technicians (NREMT) and the transition to nationally recognized levels and scopes of practice. Mr. Newlun also briefly described the Wisconsin Ambulance Run Data System (WARDS) and the Wisconsin Interoperable System for Communications (WISCOM) for radio communications by public safety personnel.

Mr. Newlun described the state's Funding Assistance Program (FAP), which has a current budget of about \$1.9 million, and may be used to obtain EMT-Basic training and to make various improvements. He also described the systems for renewals, e-licensing, and training permits, and noted that there is no licensing fee for an initial application or for a renewal that is completed on time.

Mr. Oemichen stated that under a federal initiative, Wisconsin has seven regions of health care coalitions (HCC) that connect data from hospitals, public health, and emergency management. He stated that the regions are in the process of developing medical coordination centers, with the goal of enhancing response capabilities throughout the health care system.

Mr. Oemichen concluded by stating that DHS is working to update the terminology for the licensure levels in the statutes and rules. Mr. Sechler commented that the professionalism required for each level of licensing is the same whether the person is a volunteer or career EMT.

In response to questions from Representative Kolste, Mr. Newlun described some types of criminal history that could disqualify a person from EMT licensure, and stated that DHS is reviewing appropriate methods to inquire about an applicant's mental health status.

In response to further questions, Mr. Oemichen stated that when hospital trauma data and WARDS data are linked, Wisconsin would be one of the first in the nation to have this type of comprehensive review of patient outcomes.

In response to questions from Mr. Tousey on the stress of the NREMT examination, Mr. Newlun noted that the NREMT is currently the best model for a benchmark, that the pass rate for Wisconsin paramedics is high compared to other states, and that the hours in the classroom are designed to prepare the person for the test and to provide effective EMT response when

licensed. Mr. Engels noted that the training process requires a person to drill and train repeatedly, and that it has to be a hard process in preparing a licensee to handle situations where a person's life is at risk.

Other questions focused on the number of providers operating under the reduced staffing requirements permitted by the 2015 legislation, licensure compliance rates, tuition costs for training programs, training options outside of the technical college system, training waivers for equivalent military service, procedures for EMT credentialing with a provider, community paramedicine, interstate cooperation, employee leave options when responding to a call, the exception from the local tax levy limits for countywide services, and options relating to service boundaries and requirements on responding vehicles.

A link to the DHS PowerPoint slides is available on the committee's website, noted above.

### **Presentation by Representatives of the Department of Safety and Professional Services**

#### **Jeff Weigand, Assistant Deputy Secretary, and Carl Frisque, Fire Prevention Coordinator**

Mr. Weigand briefly described the role of DSPS in regulating the training of firefighters. He noted that DSPS regulates fire departments with public employees, and that training must be equal to the requirements under the federal Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970 (OSHA) that also apply to firefighters who are private employees. Mr. Weigand noted that under state statute, DSPS cannot require more than 60 hours of training to become a structural firefighter, though individual fire departments could require more.

Mr. Weigand provided an overview of the 2% fire dues program, including the role of the DSPS' four regional fire prevention coordinators who work with the 800-plus fire departments. He stated that about \$18.5 million was distributed this year to municipalities under the program, and that the funds could be used to provide training, purchase equipment, provide public education, and fund pension funds.

Mr. Frisque commented that volunteering follows a person's life cycle, and is more common when a person is young and single or has no young children, but becomes difficult when family and work obligations expand.

In response to questions about the required number of training hours, Mr. Weigand and Mr. Frisque stated that they are aware that there is some discussion outside the department about increasing the number of training hours, but that DSPS has not been approached with any suggestion to increase the hours, and DSPS is not itself pursuing an increase to the training hours. Mr. Weigand noted that if an increase or decrease in the number of training hours were to be considered by DSPS, it would need further information and discussion on whether that would lead to improved fire departments. Mr. Frisque noted that the required hours are based on a national model.

Other questions focused on the ability of a fire department to charge fees for services, the staffing relationships between firefighters and EMTs, the frequency of EMT training for firefighters, friction in responding across jurisdictional boundaries, and the efficacy of the mutual aid box alarm system (MABAS).

### **Discussion of Committee Assignment**

Chair Nass asked committee members to discuss specific issues they think the committee should consider. The following issues were mentioned:

- Availability of other methods of providing fire and EMT instruction, outside of the technical colleges.
- Struggles that counties encounter in trying to regionalize the provision of fire and EMS services.
- Obstacles to becoming a volunteer and continuing as a volunteer.
- Costs associated with continuing education requirements for firefighters and EMTs.
- Length of EMT licensure terms compared to adjoining states.
- Options to remove NREMT testing requirements or to improve geographic and cost accessibility for the testing.
- Methods for improving the NREMT pass rates and to provide more support in the examination process.
- Involvement of hospitals in providing EMT training and continuing education.
- Options to provide more support and encouragement for individuals to consider becoming an EMT.
- Options to provide more support and opportunities for EMTs as medical professionals, and to improve retention planning efforts such as length of service awards.
- Adequacy of types of organizational structures.

### **Other Business**

There was no other business.

### **Plans for Future Meetings**

Chair Nass has scheduled the next meeting of the Study Committee for Tuesday, August 30, 2016, at 9:30 a.m. He asked members to hold the following potential meeting dates: Tuesday, September 20; Tuesday, September 27; Tuesday, October 18; Tuesday, November 15; Tuesday, December 13; and Tuesday, December 20, 2016. Chair Nass asked members to inform Legislative Council staff of any unavailability on those dates, which would be taken into consideration in finalizing the dates for future meetings.

### **Adjournment**

The meeting adjourned at 2:20 p.m.

MSK:jal