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To: Senate Committee on Housing, Rural Issues, and Forestry  
From: Toni Herkert, Government Affairs Director, League of Wisconsin Municipalities  
Date: March 16, 2023  
RE: Informational Hearing on Emergency Medical Services (EMS) in Rural Wisconsin

Chairman Quinn, Vice-Chair Jagler, and Committee Members,

My name is Toni Herkert, and I am the Government Affairs Director with the League. The League of Wisconsin Municipalities represents almost all of the 605 cities in villages, large and small, throughout the state.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today on the important topic of emergency medical services in Wisconsin. The EMS crisis is upon us. It is not down the road, and it is not theoretical. The League wanted to highlight that this is happening in communities large and small, urban and rural, all across the state. EMS services throughout Wisconsin have closed or are closing their doors, struggling to maintain volunteers or utilize paid on call during business hours, funding at the local level is tight, and districts are having difficulties retaining and recruiting responders because of low pay.

**Funding:**

EMS, like all first response services, is a local service. Nearly 80 percent of the emergency medical services in Wisconsin are owned, operated, or supported by city, village, and town governments. Our members recognize and accept this responsibility. Public safety is crucial for our communities but with levy limits in place and local government's budgets unable to grow more than net new construction, we have witnessed a record number of referendums (37 in 2022). Last November 20 public safety measures were on the ballot and 17 or 85 percent were approved. In August three of nine passed and in April of 2022 we saw eight public safety referendums and seven were approved. Clearly, there is strong public support for this critical local service.

In the Oconomowoc area the Western Lakes Fire District proposed a referendum in August last year to fund increased pay for recruitment and retention and to create some full-time responders to decrease response times. However, because it is a district, seven communities were required to pass the referendum for it to succeed. It only passed in two municipalities. Some communities have passed or may be able to pass a referendum to fund critical public safety initiatives, but some communities cannot put more on the backs of their local property tax payers.

Wisconsin is one of the only states in the nation that funds public safety primarily through the property tax. However, this session we are looking at new ways to fund local units of government and linking that funding to the growth in the State's economy. We support this initiative and thank the legislature for working to find a solution. Our current system has been unresponsive. Since 2011, shared revenue decreased by 9 percent while the cost of maintaining spending on police, fire, and EMS increased by 17 percent. Obviously, this is not sustainable.

In a straw poll survey we conducted with members this fall on local government funding questions on public safety provided the following results:

- 74% of respondents are concerned about police and EMS staffing levels.
- 75% of respondents said they have inadequate staffing levels for emergency services (ex. Police, Fire, EMS).

While discussing funding, I would be remiss if I did not thank the Legislature for passing 2021 Wisconsin Act 228 last session which provides for supplemental Medicaid reimbursements for public ambulance services once DHS seeks federal approval of a state Medicaid plan amendment. Once we actually have that program implemented there will be some additional cost recovery, but we are still looking at a long-term sustainable funding gap.

#### **Volunteers and Workforce:**

The EMS problem is heightened due to changing demographics. This change is seen both on the user side; a growing elderly population resulting in more calls, as well as the provider side; fewer young people interested in volunteering and investing in the time and training.

In Lake Mills they are scrambling to fill the service gap when their EMS provider ceases operation at the end of June. Lake Mills EMS was founded in 1974 and is an independent 501c3 charitable organization. First responder departments across the state have struggled to maintain their volunteers in recent years. A shrinking roster is a primary reason that Lake Mills EMS has said it cannot continue its service, and the Lake Mills Fire Department has seen similar issues. The city council looked at creating a joint fire-EMS department to serve residents and surrounding towns, but the costs proved infeasible and would require a referendum to fund. They are now looking at an RFP to hire an independent third-party contractor until they can work out the details necessary for a referendum question. A contractor service will most certainly face the same headwinds.

Staffing concerns are amplified when you look at Wisconsin Rural Health's statistics which show that 41% of ambulance services reported that they had open periods in their schedules where they were unavailable to respond to a single 911 call due to staffing limitations. In this instance they relied on neighboring services to ensure that citizens received ambulance service. The negative impacts here are twofold, not only is one community unable to respond to their own resident's calls, but the reliance on a neighboring community has costs as well. In the same Rural Health summary 78% of providers reported running a call for a neighboring community due to low staffing which potentially impacts their local residents and the ability to respond within their own communities.

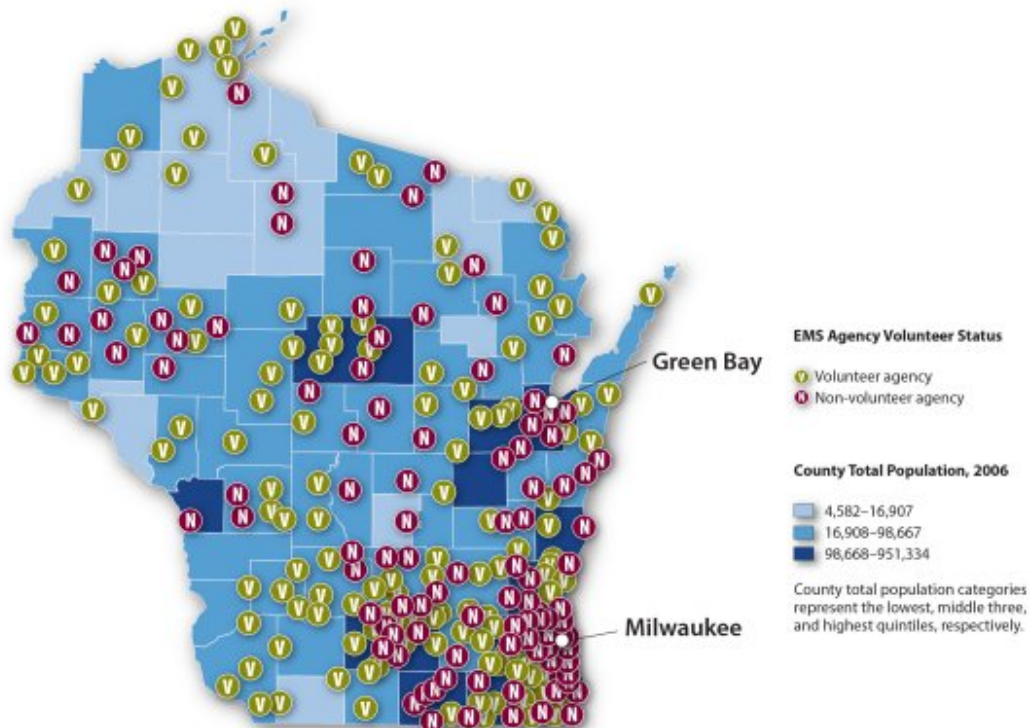
In Rhinelander if an ambulance has to cover a call in a neighboring community or run a patient to a hospital outside of the city, on some shifts they don't have enough staff to send out another ambulance or enough cross trained individuals to respond to a fire call within their community.

In a recent interview, Chief Matthew Fennig with Lake Country Fire & Rescue Department indicated eight volunteers per shift cover 80-square miles and 28,000 residents in two towns and four villages in Waukesha County. "Right now, we rely on part-time, paid, on-call people to fill about 40 percent of our schedule, and that's where we're struggling." With a relatively small staff and a large service area, the response time has increased 34 percent. EMS calls are largely rising due to an aging population. We see this story repeated throughout the state.

**Working Together:**

As you have heard today, the alarming state of emergency medical services in Wisconsin is not a town issue, or a city issue, or a village issue, or a county issue and it is not just a rural issue, it is a State of Wisconsin issue.

**EMS Agency Volunteer Status**



The League would like to incentivize collaboration and encourage communities to work together to find solutions to decrease response rates, increase staffing, and recruit and retain long-term sustainable talent. We know that this will require additional funding, and we also caution against a one-size fits all approach because the solution may be different throughout the state. Local innovation and collaboration will require flexibility to create models that work best for each location.

Also please keep in mind that working together does not always reduce costs. An Ozaukee Press article from earlier this month, discussed a report presented to the Port Washington Common Council which concluded that it would cost the city almost twice as much to consolidate its fire department with those in Saukville and Grafton than it would to improve its own department so it could efficiently handle the number of ambulance calls it receives. The report was commissioned due to staffing levels. It concluded that last year, the city did not have enough personnel to answer ambulance calls for at least six hours during the day 42 percent of the time.

Working together to innovate cannot be code for “spend less, get more.” We want to retain our volunteer model, culture, and history as long as we can, but eventually the move to a mix of paid professionals may be required. Keeping the people of Wisconsin safe will require additional financial resources. No matter how innovative we are, there will be a substantial increased cost to replace a volunteer base that is retiring and struggling to be replaced, while the number of people who need emergency services continues to grow.

The League would like to thank Chairman Quinn and committee members for your leadership on this critical issue and your time and patience today. Thank you for your consideration. I would be happy to take questions now or you can contact me at your convenience at [therkert@lwm-info.org](mailto:therkert@lwm-info.org).