



Idaho Senate & House of Representatives

March 5, 2021

Joint Legislative Oversight Committee

Dear Co-Chairs Senator Harris and Representative Rubel,

Idaho remains one of the fastest growing states in the nation, and not all of that growth is in urban areas. Rural communities are seeing increasing populations, increased tourism, increased traffic and increased pressure on volunteer first responders. New community members are often retirees, more in need of services than potential providers of volunteer services. Young community members are busy with full time jobs and raising families.

Background

At the heart of rural communities across Idaho are the local volunteer Fire and Ambulance Departments. They are held to the same training and response standards of their paid counterparts in urban areas, providing safety to our rural citizens on their property, in their homes, and to all travelers on the roads.

Idaho's reliance on volunteer EMS and Fire responders is in danger of collapsing under the weight of increased community need, challenges of recruiting and retaining volunteers, and scrambling every year to secure their own funding for their programs through grants, donations and events.

Over the past decade, numerous reviews, reports and studies have taken place regarding various aspects of emergency medical services (EMS) in Idaho. They focused on the governance of agencies, duplication of services, gaps in services, and challenges in recruitment and retention of volunteer EMS personnel. These include the following:

- 2010 Office of Performance Evaluation (OPE) award-winning report on the governance of EMS services in Idaho.
- 2012 Senate Concurrent Resolution 131 requesting the Department of Health and Welfare to conduct outreach town hall meetings throughout Idaho to

explore solutions to the challenges hindering the recruitment and retention of volunteer emergency medical services personnel.

- 2013 OPE follow up report on the governance of EMS services in Idaho.
- 2018 Senate Concurrent Resolution 135 requestion the Department of Health and Welfare for follow-up town hall meetings.

These reports have resulted in numerous changes in EMS education and training and support for continuing education. Unfortunately, the work has not resulted in significant policy changes addressing the most important issues: recruitment and retention of volunteer responders.

In rural communities, the volunteer fire fighters go hand-in-hand with the EMS team. The "Idaho Volunteer Fire and Emergency Services Association (IVFESA)" website states that they represent over 8,000 volunteer firefighters and emergency medical technicians across Idaho, which is over 75% volunteer." They provide recruitment and retention help, local training and a firefighter "training academy," and represent Idaho on the National Volunteer Firefighter Council (NVFC). They are funded through \$35 individual membership dues, direct donations or events.

There appears to be coordination between the local volunteer fire departments and the fire response by the Idaho Department of Lands, but the issues addressed in the initial OPE study for EMS including governance of agencies, duplication or gaps in services, coordination of efforts, and volunteer recruitment and retention have not be conducted.

In addition to grants and donations, EMS and fire response can be covered for local communities by property taxes collected by the county and distributed to the authorized ambulance and fire taxing districts.

Request

Idaho needs to determine ways to recruit and retain volunteer firefighters and EMT's. We would like this OPE study to focus on:

- Determining the scope of the problem (map location of departments and survey numbers of current and needed first responder volunteers),
- Review EMS administrative improvements and findings since the 2010 and 2013 OPE Evaluations and the 2012 and 2018 Town Hall sessions,
- Review of organizational structure and partnerships between Idaho's volunteer fire departments and other local and state agencies (Professional first responder units, Training Academies, Idaho Department of Lands, others),
- Identify best practices among rural states,
- Survey first responders to determine issues and outlook,

- Study and propose possible solutions to recruiting and retaining volunteers, including health benefits, retirement savings opportunities, and other options.

Thanks for your consideration.

Rep. Caroline Troy

Rep Brandon Mitchell

Rep Matt Bundy

Sen Carl Cutler

Sen Del Abel

Sen Mill-

Senator Zito