

Testimony in support of Senate Joint Resolution 5

Jim DeTienne, Supervisor, EMS and Trauma Systems Section
Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion Bureau
Public Health and Safety Division, Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services

On behalf of the Department of Public Health and Human Services, we are testifying in support of Senate Joint Resolution 5 and we would like to address a number of important issues regarding this bill.

Why study Montana's emergency care system?

What if there's an emergency and nobody comes? There are over 4,500 EMTs on over 260 emergency services in Montana. With those numbers, you would think that when you call 9-1-1 for a medical emergency, there would always be someone to respond and help. However, the majority of these EMTs are volunteers in rural communities and unfortunately, many communities are facing the question – what if there's an emergency and nobody comes.

These are numerous factors contributing to a crisis for emergency medical services in Montana including:

- A lack of potential volunteers in rural communities with ever decreasing populations
- Current volunteers who are overworked and burning out
- Training and education challenges

What are some of the challenges to Montana's EMS and emergency care system?

We need to find ways to recruit more volunteers. In a recent survey of EMS services, 90% reported recruiting volunteers as one of their greatest challenges. The average age of an EMT in this state is around 47 years old and in a recent conversation with an EMT, she reported she is 'over 70 years old'. She also discussed how her service had few EMTs and she worries about when she and her partner (who is also over 70 years old) have to quit, the service may fold. Many EMTs are 50, 60 and 70 years old and we must find ways to replace them because soon these EMTs will be needing EMS instead of providing EMS.

We need to find ways to keep the volunteers we have now. Retaining EMTs is just as critical as recruiting them. In a recent study of how long EMTs maintain their license, it was found that many

EMTs drop off after only a couple of years and thereafter, there is another significant drop-off at 5 years and 10 years. Rural EMS is dependant upon volunteers and we need to find ways to lesson the physical, mental and financial burdens of volunteering and keep the EMTs we have longer.

We need to develop an education system for our volunteers that offers local, quality, cost effective education for EMTs. A challenge for our EMS services is the initial and ongoing education of EMTs. It takes 120 to 200 hours to conduct even a basic EMT course – and much more to teach advanced skills. A typical class runs a couple of nights a week (and some weekends) for months so that the students can test for their license and finally be able to volunteer in their community. Many communities can no longer support their own courses and some prospective EMTs are forced to travel to surrounding towns for their education – with the time and cost of this travel being born out of their own pockets. We need to find better ways to educate our volunteers.

We need to develop a funding strategy which helps insure the basic viability of these critical emergency care resources. Most services struggle with funding for even basic operations. Never mind that an ambulance costs well over \$100,000 - many services struggle to even buy tires for their ambulances or basic equipment and communications. Many EMTs volunteer not only their time to train and respond to medical emergencies, but some also dedicate time to bake sales and other fund raising activities in order to meet their basic needs. Remember the '70 year old EMT' - she wasn't worried about retirement. She talked about the struggle to find a couple of hundred dollars for a suction machine – a basic lifesaving tool every service needs.

Why is it important to create an interim committee to study this issue?

Some 30 years ago, Montana's legislature became engaged with the need for an EMS system and declared in 50-6-101 MCA – “The repeated loss of persons who die unnecessarily because necessary life-support personnel and equipment are not available to victims of accidents and sudden illness is a tragedy that can and must be eliminated.”

Much work on this has already begun and what is needed now is a concerted discussion of the solutions and strategies to solve these issues. To solve challenges, EMS services, healthcare facilities, citizens,

and local governments need to become engaged. Montana's EMS system as we know it has not yet collapsed, but there are many communities truly in crisis.

What if there is an emergency and nobody comes? Until some months ago, when someone in the Rock Creek area between here and Missoula called 9-1-1, a local ambulance service responded to that call for help. Because of some of the challenges we've mentioned, there no longer is an ambulance service in Rock Creek and now when there's an emergency, it takes a lot longer for help to arrive.

Senator Brueggeman is inviting this legislature to also become engaged in meeting challenges to our EMS system and we thank him for that. Mr. Chairman, members of the committee – thank you for the opportunity to testify and we urge a do pass on Senate Joint Resolution 5.