



INCREASING FIRE, EMS & SAFETY CAPACITY IN RURAL COUNTIES

WHICH OPTION IS RIGHT FOR YOU?



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INTRODUCTION

All across the nation, rural counties are facing a unique set of challenges in providing adequate fire, emergency medical services (EMS), and public safety services to their local residents. Faced with obstacles that often contrast with their urban neighbors, rural counties grapple with budget cuts, vast landscapes, a decreased volunteer base, increased tourism-related incidents, limited staff, and more. For Utah's rural counties, ensuring that fire, EMS, and public safety staff are trained, supported, and adequately funded is key to increasing community resilience.

This document seeks to assist rural counties currently facing funding challenges to fully support their fire, EMS, and public safety services. Whether rural counties are adapting to a growing population, increasing recreational tourism, maintaining their population or in decline, ensuring that local residents have access to reliable, efficient fire, EMS, and public safety services is vital for the overall safety and health of rural counties.

POTENTIAL FUNDING OPTIONS

There is not a one-size-fits-all approach for rural counties wanting to expand their capacity in fire, EMS, and public safety services. Each county has unique challenges, specific budgets, and operations that are county-specific. While this brief identifies five potential options for increasing long-term, sustainable funding, these are not the only options that exist. What's most important is for the county and its residents to agree upon strategies that work specifically for their needs, and for fire, EMS, and safety services to be fully supported on all levels.

OPTION 1 Increase Fire, EMS, and Public Safety Allocations within County General Fund

Each year, a county's General Fund revenue (obtained through taxes, permits, fines, etc.) is allocated to a list of expenditures (payments for goods and services). Such expenditures often include: elected official salaries, planning/zoning needs, sheriff services, fire control, infrastructure maintenance, and more. During the allocation process, counties must identify what funding amounts are set to each expenditure. If fire, EMS, and public safety services are not a priority for the county, then it will be reflected in their annual budget. Most often, rural fire stations, EMS providers, and law enforcement struggle with fully funding staff at all necessary locations while also providing competitive pay due to their limited budget.

An option for rural counties faced with a low emergency management and public safety budget is to reevaluate their annual budget to determine how they can increase funding. A difficulty with this option is that it requires the county to lower the budget for one or more expenditures. For counties already faced with tight budgets, especially with a history of dipping into reserves to offset all yearly costs, this may not be a feasible option.

Adopt Additional Taxes



OPTION Increase County Sales Tax Rate

2 If a county is unable to increase their EMS allocation within their General Fund, then another strategy is to increase the sales tax rate to collect more revenue for the emergency management and public safety allocations. This strategy is particularly beneficial for rural counties with increasing tourism, where the purchasing of goods, lodging, and services from tourists could supplement EMS costs. Consequently, however, this places an additional burden on local residents if they're primarily purchasing goods and services within the local county.

OPTION The state of Utah establishes the state sales tax rate (as of September 2018 the rate is 4.7%), and then the county votes on their own rate to be added to the grand total of the sales tax. After that grand total, local governments can charge additional taxes, which must be approved by voters in those political jurisdictions. Depending on eligibility, local governments may possibly add:

Transient Room Tax (TRT) a rental tax paid by a guest for short-term rentals of less than 30 consecutive days (this includes hotels, motels, inns, tourist homes, trailers, courts, or campgrounds). Municipalities can charge a TRT of up to one (1) percent. The TRT revenue allows municipalities to use the funds “for general fund purposes” (*UCA 59-12-352*), meaning the funds are available for most municipal needs, however, best practices suggest committing the funds to specific, related purposes. For more information visit: www.ruralplanning.org/trt.

Rural Hospital Tax (RHT) for a county of the fifth class (a county with a population of 4,000 or more but less than 11,000) or sixth class (a county with a population less than 4,000), this tax may fund rural EMS in that county up to one (1) percent (*UCA 59-12-802*).

Resort Communities Tax (RCT) for a municipality in which the transient room capacity is greater than or equal to 66% of the municipality's permanent census population may impose an additional resort communities sales tax in an amount that is less than or equal to 0.5%. (*UCA 59-12-402*).

Case Study: Oregon's Rural EMS Providers Individual Income Tax Credit

In 2005, the Oregon Legislature passed Senate Bill 31, which grants up to \$250 in personal income tax to eligible emergency medical services providers who volunteer their services to rural Oregon communities. In 2015, 830 rural EMTs received this tax credit.¹ This tax credit will sunset after 15 years (Dec 31, 2020), and contains specific eligibility requirements.²

You must be an Emergency Medical Services Provider (Emergency Medical Responder, EMT Basic, Advanced EMT, EMT-Intermediate or Paramedic) licensed by the State of Oregon, providing some services on a volunteer basis.

Your EMS provider volunteer service must meet the following definition: A "volunteer" is a person properly training under Oregon law who either operates an ambulance to and from the scene of an emergency or renders emergency medical treatment on a volunteer

basis so long as the total reimbursement received for such volunteer services does not represent more than 25% of his or her gross annual income and does not exceed \$3,000 per calendar year.

The time you spend providing EMS provider services as a volunteer must be 20% or more of your total EMS provider time (paid and volunteer combined). In addition, your volunteer time must be spent with a station or agency in a qualifying area, which is 25 miles from a city of 30,000 or more. All stand by, response and training time spent as an EMT counts.



OPTION 4 Develop a Special Service District/Local District

Utah counties have the ability to create Special Service Districts (SSD), which are independent, special purpose governmental units that exist as separate entities. SSDs have substantial administrative and fiscal independence from the general purpose of local governments, and can serve cities, a single county, or a larger regional area. They are governed by a board.

Utah Law

A county may create a special service district to provide fire protection, including emergency medical services, ambulance services, and search and rescue services, if fire protection service is also provided (UCA 17D-1-201).

Process⁴

1. County commissioners propose to create a special service district adopting a resolution that:
 - a. Declares that the public health, convenience, and necessity require the creation of a special service district;
 - b. Indicates the legislative body's intent to create a special service district;
 - c. Describe the boundaries of the proposed special service district;
 - d. Specify each service that the special service district is proposed to provide; and
 - e. Designate a name for the proposed special service district.
2. Before the county adopts a resolution or ordinance approving the creation of a SSD, they need to:
 - (1) have the clerk/recorder give written notice to the public;
 - (2) hold a public meeting; and
 - (3) wait until the period for filing protests has passed without adequate protests having been filed.

3. Within 30 days after adopting the resolution or ordinance, a copy of a notice of impending boundary action and a copy of an approved final local entity plat must be filed with the lieutenant governor.

If a rural county shares a border with a neighboring Fire Special Service District (SSD), an option may be to join with that SSD to increase capacity. For rural counties that are not located near Fire SSDs, it may be worthwhile to either develop their own SSD or a Local District.

Local Districts differ from SSDs due to their funding source. SSDs typically acquire their funding from fees and bonding; whereas Local Districts can levee taxes in addition to fees and bonding.

Under UC 17B-1-202, a Local District may be created for fire protection, paramedic, and emergency services, including consolidated 911 and emergency dispatch services.

Local Districts levy (impose) and collect property taxes (UC 17B-1-1001). By creating an Emergency Services District, there may be a fire fee placed on tax forms for property taxes. As of May 2015, the rate at which a district levies a property tax for district operation and maintenance expenses on the taxable value of taxable property within the district may not exceed 0.0008% for a fire protection district (UC 17B-1-1002).

OPTION 5 Contract for Private Ambulance Services

Rural communities are often only aware of a limited number of contractors and service providers to choose from when working on projects. Communities that lack expertise in government procurement (the purchasing of goods and services) can end up overpaying, receiving substandard services, or paying for unneeded services.

Before counties hire contractors for fire, EMS, and public safety support, it is required by Utah law that an established procurement policy be in place to ensure that local residents are receiving the best options for their communities. Utah Code 63G-6a is the Procurement Code for the State of Utah. Administrative Rule R33 lays out the particular rules of procurement for local governments in Utah. In conjunction with or in place of R33, local governments can create their own Procurement Code and rules by ordinance (Utah Division of Purchasing and General Services. Purchasing 101: Buying According to the Procurement Code & Administrative Rule R33. 2016. <http://purchasing.utah.gov/for-agencies/training/>). For counties that have not adopted their

own procurement codes, the Utah Procurement Code and Utah Administrative Code R33 apply, becoming the community's procurement code. The Utah Community Development Office recently released a Procurement Policy & Best Practices Guide, found at ruralplanning.org/procurement.

Many communities around the nation contract with private, for-profit ambulance companies for Basic Life Support (BLS) ambulance-transportation services, while their fire department provides Advance Life Support (ALS) paramedic response.³ Within this agreement, if their fire department paramedic provides ALS services on the BLS transport vehicle, the private ambulance company can charge ALS rates (this contract can be structured so that the private company pays the fire department for the difference between BLS and ALS rates, and reimburses for ALS supplies used during patient treatment).³

When considering contracting services, care should be taken to draft a comprehensive Request for Proposals (RFP) to evaluate potential contractors, and should include: clearly defined performance standards, measurable goals, and a clearly-defined fee structure.³ The State of Utah Division of Purchasing can assist communities with procurement questions. Contact Nikki Sanchez, Purchasing Agent, 801.538.3342, nsanchez@utah.gov.



What is a Public Utility Model?

A Public Utility Model (PUM) is an emergency medical service system in which the government is a “purchaser” of dispatchers, emergency medical technicians (EMTs) and paramedic providers, typically from a private ambulance company. Within this model, the county retains control of all EMS system capital assets and accounts receivable through daily oversight, and the EMS provider (contractor) manages the day-to-day operations and provides trained providers.

INNOVATIVE OPTIONS

In addition to the five funding options outlined above, rural counties across the country have implemented innovative funding sources to fit their particular needs. This list includes a brief snapshot of what some of those funding sources are. If interested, the U.S. Fire Administration alongside the Federal Emergency Management Agency released their guide entitled *Funding Alternatives for Emergency Medical and Fire Services*.⁵

Special Service (Standby and Fire Watch) Fees

Fire and EMS personnel that provide standby services (for example, at a football game or rodeo) could potentially charge a special service fee, which would be less than if the user contracted with a for-profit provider. This enables the fire and EMS personnel to be reimbursed for their services.

Fines for Nuisance Alarms

When a fire department responds to a false alarm, there is the potential risk of danger for the public and firefighters. To offset this issue, some cities across the country have adopted nuisance and unwanted alarm ordinances that include fines to encourage better maintenance of systems, place greater responsibility on the system owner for unnecessary/inappropriate actions triggering alarms, and recover some of the costs of responding to these types of alarms.³ An example of a model fire alarm ordinance is available on the False Alarm Reduction Association webpage www.faraonline.org

Paramedic/Physician Assistant In-Home Services

This involves hosting a pilot program, where a two-person non-transport response vehicle, staffed with a paramedic and a physician's assistant/nurse practitioner, provide "house calls" to patients with flu-related symptoms or urgent-care calls that could be treated at home.³ While EMS providers can only bill third-party payers for transportation services, a nurse can receive reimbursement for patient evaluation and on-scene treatments; a public-private partnership between a hospital and EMS provider could provide a new, innovative service delivery model that generates revenue for both entities.³

Annual Fundraisers

For rural fire and EMS departments, fundraisers are a great alternative funding source. A few ideas include:³

- 5k, 10k, and Fun Run Events
- Barbeque
- Bingo
- First-Aid Kits
- Wait Tables at Local Restaurants
- Website and Internet Fundraising

GRANT FUNDING

In addition to determining a long-term funding strategy, counties and fire, EMS, and public safety staff can also apply for a number of grants that provide life-saving equipment, prevention education, disaster relief, and more. Here is a list of potential grant funding/supplies for fire, EMS, and law enforcement providers:

Annual Deadlines

FEMA Emergency Management Performance Grant⁶

Purpose: To provide federal funds to assist state, local, territorial, and tribal governments in preparing for all hazards. This funding provides assistance for local emergency management agencies to obtain the resources required to support implementation of the National Preparedness System and the National Preparedness Goal of a secure and resilient nation.

FEMA Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER)⁷

Purpose: The purpose of the SAFER grant program is to provide funding directly to fire departments and volunteer firefighter interest organizations to assist in increasing the number of firefighters to help communities meet industry minimum standards and attain 24-hour staffing to provide adequate protection from fire and fire-related hazards, and to fulfill traditional missions of fire departments.

U.S. Dept. of Justice Community Policing Development Grant⁸

Purpose: Community Policing Development funds are used to develop the capacity of law enforcement to implement community policing strategies by providing guidance on promising practices. This grant will fund projects that develop knowledge, increase awareness of effective community policing strategies, increase the skills and abilities of law enforcement, and more.

USDA Community Facilities Direct Loan and Grant Program⁹

Purpose: This program provides affordable funding to develop essential community facilities in rural areas. Funds can be used to purchase, construct, and/or improve essential community facilities, purchase equipment and pay related project expenses. Examples include public safety services such as fire departments, police stations, police vehicles, and fire trucks.

Utah Bureau of EMS Grants¹⁰

Purpose: The Legislature established the EMS grants program for the purpose of improving the statewide delivery of emergency medical services. The Utah Emergency Medical Services System Act (Utah Code 26-8a-207) requires the Bureau of Emergency Medical Services & Preparedness to administer per capita competitive grant funds for licensed or designated EMS providers.

Utah Fire Department Assistance Grant¹¹

Purpose: To provide technical and financial assistance to the fire departments of Utah to improve their ability to safely and effectively provide fire protection and manage hazardous material incidents.

Sub-Annual Deadlines

Permanent Community Impact Board - Grants/Low-Interest Loans¹² [Trimester Deadline]

Purpose: The Permanent Community Impact Board provides loans and grants to counties, cities and towns that are impacted by mineral resource development on federal lands.

Firehouse Subs Public Safety Foundation¹³ [Quarterly Deadline]

Purpose: To impact the lifesaving capabilities, and the lives of local heroes and their communities. This is accomplished by providing lifesaving equipment and prevention education tools to first responders and public safety organizations. Law enforcement, fire departments, and EMS are all encouraged to apply for lifesaving equipment.

SURPLUS PROPERTY PROGRAMS

Federal Surplus Property Program¹⁴

The Federal Surplus Property Program is a Utah State governmental program that is tasked with the responsibility of locating, acquiring, and distributing federal surplus personal property to what is commonly referred to as “donees” consisting of state and local governments and eligible non-profit organizations. All cities, towns, and counties are eligible for this program, but an eligibility form including terms and conditions for all signers must be completed and submitted to the Utah Division of Purchasing and General Services first. Property is acquired from various federal agencies and military installations nationally and worldwide. Items normally available include:

- Generators
- Vehicles
- Boats
- Medical Equipment
- Fire Fighting Equipment
- Heavy Equipment

Law Enforcement 1033 Program¹⁵

The Secretary of Defense is authorized under Section 1033 of the National Defense Authorization Act of Fiscal Year 1997 to transfer to federal and state law enforcement agencies property that is in excess to the Department of Defense (DOD). With necessary justification, property can be screened by local law enforcement organizations and obtained on the same level as other federal agencies. This program has the potential of providing law enforcement with a variety of items, which can include:

- Firearms
- Aircraft
- Boats
- Vehicles
- Body Armor
- Night Vision Scopes

Property obtained under this program is restricted to law enforcement activities that have full arrest and apprehension authority and has the same compliance standards as other property acquired under the Federal Surplus Property Program. Currently, priority for obtaining property is with local enforcement agencies involved with counter-drug and counter-terrorism activities. In order to participate, complete a Participation Form for your organization. This is provided to the Law Enforcement Support Office (LESO) and entered into their database, allowing the law enforcement office, in conjunction with the Utah Division of Purchasing and General Services, the ability to screen and obtain excess DOD property worldwide.



VOLUNTEER RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION STRATEGIES

Traditionally, fire and EMS services were sustained by a dependent source of local volunteers. However, a challenge faced in rural America is a dwindling volunteer base accompanied with an increase in responsibilities and educational requirements. In a Rural Health Information Hub article published on February 7, 2018, Andy Gienapp, Director of the Wyoming Office of EMS, discussed how as the average age of rural residents increases, many towns are relying on local senior citizens and retirees to manage EMS agencies. "EMS is being held together by an older generation who is very much connected to their neighbors [and who believe that being an EMS volunteer] is a way they can give back to their community," stated Gienapp, "but younger generations simply are not connected that way."¹⁶

Gienapp shares how volunteering for longer hours, commuting further distances, and family obligations prevent younger individuals from serving with EMS, especially when they can volunteer at a soup kitchen or at a shelter for a couple of hours instead.¹⁶ This has erupted into a "cultural shift," which encourages EMS agencies to change how they recruit volunteers and to possibly transition into offering financial incentives as the uncompensated volunteer base is growing rare.¹⁶

For EMS volunteers, one of the biggest challenges involves the number of training hours required for certification. Most often, potential volunteers are taking courses 20+ hours a week, and only a few end

up graduating.¹⁶ At times, requirements to become a certified EMT are undersold to entice volunteers, but in the end, a lack of transparency can be detrimental to the final amount of those that finish their courses. Before volunteers begin taking classes, Ken Reed, Rugby, North Dakota EMS Director, suggests bringing volunteers on as a driver or assistant first, which allows them to experience the environment and could then fuel their motivation to become an EMT.¹⁶ By having an active presence on social media, local papers, and at recruitment events, fire and EMS agencies can boost awareness of the requirements in becoming a certified volunteer.¹⁶

Interested in self-assessing your organization's strengths, weaknesses, and long-term survivability? The North Dakota Rural EMS Improvement Project designed a free self-assessment tool for organizations to better understand how to maximize their appeal to a shrinking pool of potential volunteers. This self-assessment tool can be found at <https://www.health.nd.gov/media/1322/volunteersustaintool.pdf>.

Offer Stipends

STRATEGY

1

While small, stipends provided for runs can incentivize future volunteers and compensate those that have been volunteering for your organization. By establishing a set pay rate and schedule (e.g., stipends can cover up to 16 calls every two weeks or 32 calls a month), your organization can properly budget for providing this incentive while also sustaining that financial cost.¹⁶

STRATEGY Provide Mentorship

2 For newcomers, pairing them with experienced paramedics and EMTs who intentionally offer support until they reach journeyman status in their particular level of licensure will set them up for success.¹⁶ By providing mentors that can assist newcomers in all facets of their service (mental/emotional strain, training, burnout, etc.), better care and support can retain your volunteers.

STRATEGY Involve Local Businesses

3 For local businesses that have the flexibility to offer assistance to EMS and fire volunteers, there may be a possibility for those businesses to provide paid time off for their employees to take ambulance and fire calls. In North Dakota, a co-owner of a local business says that he could be a firefighter himself, but pays his employees, so he's "trying to do [his] part to show respect and support for their work in the community. As a business owner, it's the least [he] can do."¹⁶ In New Jersey, the Middlesex County Department of Public Safety and Health designed reward cards for their volunteer firefighters and EMTs; these cards can be used in local businesses to receive discounts and benefits.¹⁶

STRATEGY Create a Youth Pipeline

4 A common occurrence in rural counties is that once their youth graduate from high school, they tend to move to more urbanized areas for employment. A way to incentivize youth in staying within their hometown is to initiate a youth pipeline program, where qualifying high school students can take on EMT and firefighting training. By obtaining training before high school graduation, youth are well-equipped for volunteering and employment right out of school.

Additionally, in 2007, the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) launched the National Junior Firefighter Program to support fire departments by developing relationships and engaging youth in learning about, and ultimately becoming, members of the emergency services. (<https://juniors.nvfc.org/about/>) To start a local program, access the NVFC's Junior Firefighter Program Starter Kit at https://www.nvfc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/JR_Starter_Kit-final.pdf.

SUPPORT FOR FIRE AND EMS

Fire/EMS Helpline

Firefighters and EMS personnel face many unique challenges that can have a significant impact on their behavioral health.¹⁷ To ensure these individuals and their families have access to the help they need, the National Volunteer Fire Council joined American Addiction Centers to create a free, confidential helpline available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.¹⁷ First responders and their families can call the Fire/EMS Helpline any time day or night to seek help for a variety of behavioral health issues, such as: alcohol or drug addiction, depression, suicide prevention, stress or anxiety, critical incidents, work-related concerns, PTSD, and more.¹⁷

Fire/EMS Helpline Phone Number:
1-888-731-FIRE (3473)

Share the Load Support Program for Fire and EMS

Since firefighters and EMS providers face the risk of many behavioral health concerns such as anxiety, depression, burnout, and more, the National Volunteer Fire Council's Share the Load program provides access to critical resources and information to help first responders and their families manage and overcome personal and work-related problems.

This program includes posters, ads, and trainings; as well as videos, helplines, reports, webinars, and more. Resources can be accessed at <https://www.nvfc.org/programs/share-the-load-program/>.

ASSISTANCE

Grant Writing Assistance

Need assistance on applying for EMS grants? The National Organization of State Offices of Rural Health offers a three-part webinar series entitled EMS Grant Writing 101 Institute,¹⁸ which introduces EMS agencies to the basics of grant writing, identifies how to connect with funders and partners, and shares where to find funding. This series typically occurs in July.

AOG Assistance

Every Association of Governments (AOG) in Utah has a regional planner who helps communities with community development issues. These regional planners are supported by Utah's Community Development Office, and can provide technical assistance to communities in various ways.

Technical Assistance

The regional planner can provide advice on county-wide taxes, special service districts, planning, maps, ordinances or find resources to help. For more planning and community development resources, visit ruralplanning.org/toolbox.

Additionally, the new Rural EMS Directors of Utah Association exists to unify and empower rural EMS directors to lead EMS into the future. For more information, contact Andy Smith, President, at asmith@grandcountyutah.net

LINKS & WORKS CITED

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