

# The Daily Press

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## EMERGENCY TRAINING



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Members of the Iron River Ambulance Service conduct emergency medical technician and firefighter training on a simulated vehicle accident. The training undergone by EMTs represents a substantial commitment, but it is an effort that assists their neighbors in times of need, and provides personal rewards far beyond any financial inducement.

## Officials try to counter shortage of emergency services personnel

BY RICK OLIVO  
STAFF WRITER

For many small communities in northwestern Wisconsin, taking care of critical situations like fires and medical emergencies has traditionally been done the way most things are handled out here: neighbor helping neighbor.

Even into the 21st century, area volunteer first responders and Emergency Medical Technicians (EMT) are often the first ones on the scene at a traffic accident, a rural home fire or other life-threatening situation.

Some of the emergency medical services in Bayfield and Ashland Counties cover as much as 250 square miles. In the summer, with the influx of tourists in the Apostle Islands area there are as much as 50,000 more people. Areas like Red Cliff, Bayfield and Madeline Island are especially busy during the summer months, so the need for trained emergency medical personnel is obvious.

However, according to officials who deal with the administration of such efforts, it has become harder and harder to ensure that the safety net of emergency personnel is adequate for the needs of the tens of thousands of people who live in the

region.

It's actually a workforce issue, said Marcy Pratt, the finance Director for the Northwest Wisconsin Concentrated Employment program.

"The recruitment and retention of emergency medical technicians in rural areas of the state is in big trouble," she said.

That trouble is in recruiting, training and retaining people in the vital rural EMT jobs.

"The average age of people who are EMTs is somewhere around 57 years of age in rural Wisconsin," Pratt said. "Some of local EMS services are that high, one of them said their average age is 63."

It is perplexing to realize this situation has come about in a state that prides itself on volunteerism, on neighbor helping neighbor. But, said Pratt, it's really not

that hard to figure out.

"Part of it are the challenges of living in a rural area," Pratt said. "There is quite a bit of training involved in volunteering to become an EMT, it's actually a non-paid position. When you go out on a call, you are paid for that call, but it's not a career. It's a few extra dollars a year. It's about how you feel about your community. One of the publications I read about EMTs noted that it's not

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## FIRE SEASON

# Gear, crews ready

BY MIKE SIMONSON  
WISCONSIN PUBLIC RADIO

Fire crews, fire fighters and support crews from Douglas, Burnett and Washburn Counties are standing by — hoping for the best, and ready for the worst — in the northwestern Wisconsin blow down area.

Governor Scott Walker and State Senator Bob Jauch checked out fire suppression drop tanks yesterday and talked with the pilots of the planes that would drop the fluid.

"At what point do you bring the plane in?" asked Walker.

"Right away, especially in the conditions we have now with the blowdown," the pilot responded.

Emergency burning restrictions began Friday in parts of Burnett, Washburn, Polk and Douglas Counties where a quarter million acre and one million cords of wood were blown down during a July 1 windstorm. Walker says the list of don'ts may be long, but he can shorten that list.

"The simple answer is: If you've got anything that has a flame to it, the answer's no," Walker said succinctly.

Extra planes, extra bulldozers, extra crews are on standby in Siren and Solon Springs. Walker says he's satisfied they've done what they can to prepare for wildfires.

"We've got good partnership both with Minnesota as well as Canada. You've got a dramatic increase in the amount of equipment for fighting fires here. But let that not be a false confidence that just because we've got a lot of equipment here that means that people don't need to take these restrictions seriously."

In fact, people in the blow-down area like Kim Burdick at Wild Bill's Outpost in Webster are taking this seriously.

"Oh, absolutely. No smoking outside. It's dry. If it starts fire, it's gone," Burdick said.

The emergency burning restrictions will be in place until further notice — probably once things green-up, which could take until some time in May, depending on the weather.





PHOTO SUBMITTED

**Those who would become emergency medical technicians must undergo many hours of classroom and practical training before they can apply their skills in the community. Once there they work as part of a team, making a commitment to serve their community. According to Emergency Medical Services officials, there is a critical need for EMTs and other volunteers to help services throughout northern Wisconsin.**

## OFFICIALS: EMTs are needed

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what you do, it's who you are."

In addition, rural areas in northern Wisconsin are aging significantly, leaving a shrinking pool of possible recruits to replace the existing EMT pool.

"It's also about the economy," said Pratt. Younger couples are so busy trying to keep their families together. It's harder to volunteer when you are trying to make ends meet, and to be an EMT takers a significant commitment," she said.

One organization that is facing this challenge is the South Shore Ambulance Service. According to Gail Gonsior, her service has seen the number of volunteers fall since she joined the organization over a dozen years ago.

"When I began we had 17 or 18 members, now we are down to 10 or 11," she said. "We have as many calls as ever, with fewer people to respond," she said. "And those people are working full time, and aren't as available as they used to be," she said. "It used to be that there were a lot of people who were stay-at-home moms or were retired or whatever, and were available, and I don't think we have that many people anymore."

The situation has gotten serious enough that, from time to time, there aren't enough people to respond.

"We have people who aren't working on the South Shore; they aren't working in Port Wing or Herbster. They are working in Superior, Duluth or Ashland. That really hurts their response time," observed Tam Hoffman of the South Shore Ambulance Service

Another issue is continuing education, which adds to the time commitment that needs to be made; something that makes an already tough sell even tougher for

would be EMTs, already trying to juggle complicated lives of work and family.

The bottom line is that these factors have resulted in a tottering volunteer-based emergency services system.

"I describe it as a house of cards," said Dan Clark of the Washburn Ambulance Service. "If some of our neighboring services can't cover, and they request us to cover for them, then who is covering for us when we are doing that? It's very much a domino effect."

One possible answer to the shortage of EMT personnel is a recruitment campaign being mounted by CEP, to attempt to highlight the crucial need for emergency medical technicians in area EMS agencies.

That's not going to be an easy proposal at any time, and it's being made more difficult by federal and state mandates requiring increased training times for EMT qualification.

Clark said the effort was reaching out, even to people who might not think they have the makeup to handle the responsibility. Clark noted that the superb training given in the EMT course, the team approach used in Emergency Services helped people to gain skills and confidence.

"A lot of people worry about the really bad calls, but most of them are not like that; most of them are just helping your neighbors," he said.

Even if people can't become EMTs there are other positions in the Emergency Medical Service that they could assist with.

"Maybe they can help write a grant, maybe they can come up every other week and help wash the ambulance," he said.

And there is a profound upside to working in EMS.

"I am just blown away how enthused the EMTs who are part of the ser-

vices are; how good they feel about working with people who are professionals and the good that they do for their communities. Its so rewarding when they go out on a call and someone says, 'you are my neighbor, and thank you for helping me,'" said Pratt.

Pratt said the CEP campaign was partially an awareness campaign — an effort to let the public know the seriousness of the situation.

"We think if people were really aware of this, and we tried to do some recruitment, we think some people would step up," she said.

She said it was also important for employers to enable their workers to take part in EMS.

"Their support of employees that are EMTs is very important, and support from families is also vital," she said.

In order to make the recruitment effort more visible, a pair of recruitment activities is currently planned. The first will be at the Ashland Home Show on Saturday and Sunday, April 21 and 22 at the Bay Area Civic Center, where CEP will man a recruiting booth, passing out information about the need for EMTs, and about training opportunities. The other activity will be at the Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center on May 5, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. In addition, the Northwest CEP website at <http://www.nwcep.org> will have a video about EMT service within a week.

Gonsior noted that while it was not an easy task to become an EMT, it was unquestionably a rewarding avocation.

"They get as much as they give, when they become an EMT," she said. "I don't think people really realize that; it is a truly rewarding thing."

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