



KING COUNTY AUDITOR'S OFFICE

AUGUST 2, 2019




Follow-up on Emergency Medical Services: Actions needed to address upcoming retirements and workforce diversity

Emergency Medical Services and its regional partners have taken steps to address workforce challenges related to retirements and limited diversity. Their efforts will result in greater continuity of service through adequate staffing as well as improved service provision to diverse communities. Our audit initiated discussion of upcoming workforce challenges in time for the Emergency Medical Services (EMS) system to organize and begin to take action. As a result, the region incorporated planning around the workforce challenges into its recently completed process to develop strategic and financial plans for the levy span of 2020-2025. The plans include strategies such as increasing paramedic student funding to accommodate an anticipated influx to meet regional need, enhancing standardized mental health peer support opportunities regionwide, and exploring resource sharing opportunities for paramedic workforce staffing and recruitment.

The division has laid groundwork for modifying its contracts to require agencies to collect data on self-identified race and gender of staff and applicants because stakeholders have not yet reached the point in their process to accommodate such a change.

EMS implemented both of our financial recommendations to eliminate undesignated reserves and consider banking levy capacity. EMS moved its undesignated funds into a 90-day rainy day reserve fund and a rate stabilization reserve fund, so all funds are now actively managed according to Government Finance Officers Association best practices. EMS and its partners reviewed banking levy capacity but did not choose to pursue it as a strategy. However, the rate stabilization reserve fund thus functions in a similar manner as banking capacity, providing the regional EMS system some protection against economic downturn.

Of the 5 audit recommendations:

	3 DONE		1 PROGRESS		1 OPEN
Fully implemented Auditor will no longer monitor.		Partially implemented Auditor will continue to monitor.		Remain unresolved Auditor will continue to monitor.	

Please see below for details on the implementation status of these recommendations.



Recommendation 1

PROGRESS



The Emergency Medical Services Division should work with levy partners on developing, implementing, and documenting strategic workforce planning practices, such as the practices identified in this report.

STATUS UPDATE: EMS and its partner agencies incorporated workforce planning into the strategic and financial plans for the upcoming 2020-2025 levy. Stakeholders agreed that the EMS Division should continue to convene regional groups to share plans and discuss options to address staffing shortages. They identified workforce planning issues, including the following

- Retirements are resulting in a reduced workforce and the region is experiencing a shortage of certified paramedics to put on ambulances.
- The low unemployment rate and fewer younger people entering the workforce (choosing college instead) may exacerbate hiring obstacles.
- Extended family medical leave and military deployments will impact overtime.
- High turnover rates could present cost and staffing challenges, such as funding student training and hiring, retirement payouts, and an increased need for recruitments.

The specific workforce planning processes mentioned in the report were 1) analyzing data on trends that will impact how many emergency medical technicians (EMT) and paramedics will need to be hired, and 2) conducting cost analysis.

With regard to the first workforce planning process, division managers indicated that they will conduct quantitative analysis on the number of paramedics needed and the number in the training pipeline during the 2020-2025 levy period. Concerning the second workforce planning process, the division conducted an analysis of paramedic training costs in collaboration with Advanced Life Support (ALS) partners during levy planning. The result was to change the ALS levy funding allocation to cover training on a reimbursement basis, which will result in an increase in funding for paramedic training.

In addition to providing greater funding for paramedics, the division scheduled an additional 14-week training class to accommodate EMT staffing needs for Basic Life Support agencies and is working with the region to evaluate whether additional classes will be needed in the future. Staff are planning to conduct further discussions during the 2020-2025 levy to determine what level of additional analysis and support agencies will find useful.

WHAT REMAINS: To complete this recommendation, the division should implement its plans to analyze data on EMT and paramedic students during the 2020-2025 levy and document the results. In addition, EMS should continue to facilitate regional discussions and strategies for workforce planning.

Recommendation 2

DONE



The Emergency Medical Services Division should work with regional partners to develop, document, and implement a plan to improve workforce diversity, including leading practices such as barrier analysis.

STATUS UPDATE: In 2017, the EMS Division expanded the Equity and Social Justice Diversity Project and combined efforts with the King County Fire Chiefs Association (KCFCFA) to increase the diversity in the EMT and paramedic workforce and within the EMS Division. The division and its partners conducted a barrier analysis at the KCFCFA diversity workshop in May 2019. This work identified issues with the old system that perpetuated the dominance of white males in the fire and emergency medical service workforce.

As documented in the EMS 2018 Annual Report, the division has a number of different strategies underway to improve the recruitment of diverse candidates to the EMS workforce, to improve the application process and hiring of diverse candidates, and to develop a standardized internal hiring process. Strategies include outreach to communities and vocational schools, additional recruitment opportunities with the Strategic Training and Recruitment (STAR) Program to target groups that are underrepresented in the EMT workforce, and enhanced focus on hiring processes within King County Medic One and the EMS Division. According to EMS staff, the KCFCFA plans to build a website to support diversity in the EMT/paramedic workforce. Four STAR program graduates have been hired by King County EMS agencies.

IMPACT: EMS and its partners have begun to make changes that will lead to a more diverse workforce that reflects the community they serve. The County's own EMS agency, King County Medic One, made changes to its job descriptions to be more inclusive and increased hiring panel diversity.

Recommendation 3

OPEN



To mitigate risk and obtain key information to inform workforce diversity efforts, the Emergency Medical Services Division should modify its contracts with partner agencies to require them to collect, maintain, and report data on self-identified race and gender of staff and applicants.

STATUS UPDATE: EMS is in the early stages of preparing to move forward with this recommendation. Staff indicated that momentum is building among partner agencies for assessing workforce diversity and agencies are in different stages of collecting and examining data. KCFCFA is working on identifying the extent of data that is collected by its regional partners. Next steps for both the EMS Division and KCFCFA are to develop workforce diversity goals and measures for the region. After identifying and vetting goals, they will determine what data to collect and how it will be used to gauge success.

Recommendation 4

DONE



The Emergency Medical Services Division should establish guidelines addressing the best practices identified by the Government Finance Officers Association for managing the undesignated fund maintained by the county.

STATUS UPDATE: In the December 2017 EMS Advisory Committee meeting, EMS received approval from regional partners to revise its reserve fund to comply with updated King County financial policies. One of the revisions was to eliminate undesignated funds in the EMS fund and

move anything in excess of the 90-day rainy day reserve fund into the rate stabilization reserve fund. This change was also incorporated into the 2020-2025 Medic One/EMS Strategic Plan.

IMPACT: Eliminating the undesignated fund balance means that all funds are managed actively and in line with King County policies, which adhere to Government Finance Officers Association best practices. Designating funds for specific purposes also avoids the potentially time-consuming process of joint decision-making on fund use.

Recommendation 5

DONE



The Emergency Medical Services Division should work with its partner agencies to evaluate if banking levy capacity would be a useful levy financial management tool and document its evaluation as part of the 2020 – 2025 levy planning process.

STATUS UPDATE: The EMS Advisory Task Force Finance Subcommittee discussed banking levy capacity during the 2020-2025 levy planning process but it did not gain regional support.

According to EMS managers, the group found another means to mitigate risks of a potential economic downturn during the levy period. As documented in the 2020-2025 strategic plan, the rate stabilization reserves that include all funds above programmatic needs can be used to either cover expenses in the case of an economic downturn or “buy down” the next levy rate. The rate stabilization reserve thus functions in a similar manner as banking levy capacity.

IMPACT: While EMS and its partners did not choose to bank levy capacity directly, they found another way to provide flexible protection for the regional system from unforeseen financial risks, including the ability to direct fund balances into reserves or reduce a future levy rate.

Laina Poon, Principal Management Auditor, conducted this review. If you have any questions or would like more information, please contact the King County Auditor’s Office at KCAO@KingCounty.gov or 206-477-1033.