



KING COUNTY AUDITOR'S OFFICE

AUGUST 1, 2023

Follow-Up on Emergency Medical Services: Actions Needed to Address Upcoming Retirements and Workforce Diversity

In response to our recommendation, the Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Division averted a staffing shortage from a wave of retirements and departures in the 28 partner fire agencies that provide EMS services to King County. Since we made this recommendation in 2017 (and despite the intervening COVID-19 pandemic), the division and its partners have completed a large body of work to analyze workforce needs and implement strategies to ensure adequate Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) and paramedic staffing in the current and 2026–2031 levy period.

EMS's progress has slowed in collecting, analyzing, and reporting partner agency race and gender data, extending legal risks and delaying accountability. Division leaders stated that they are continuing to work with partner agencies on diversity, equity, and inclusion, however lack of active oversight and transparency may result in slower progress toward diversifying the County's emergency medical staff, who are still overwhelmingly White and male. King County fire chiefs stated in a consultant report that they believe having diverse departments makes them more effective and better able to serve their communities. Complete race and gender data would enable the division to understand trends in demographic representation in the emergency medical workforce, which would provide insight into the effectiveness of diversification efforts. In addition, maintaining this information may also help protect the County from legal risks such as lawsuits under the Civil Rights Act.

Of the remaining two audit recommendations:

 1 DONE	 1 PROGRESS	 0 OPEN
<p>Fully implemented. Auditor will no longer monitor.</p>	<p>Partially implemented. Auditor will continue to monitor.</p>	<p>Remain unresolved. Auditor will continue to monitor.</p>

Please see details below for implementation status of each recommendation.

Recommendation 1

DONE



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: In the last year, the EMS Division worked with its regional partners to develop and implement paramedic workforce strategies to ensure adequate paramedic staffing for the region into the next levy period (2026–2031). Strategies included support for paramedic recruitment, mentoring, training, and retirements. One key component is a newly flexible system to reimburse actual costs associated with paramedic recruitment and training. In addition, the division helped establish and fund a mentoring system for new paramedics to receive support from certified field paramedics. This practice speeds adjustment to working in the field, improves skills, and supports staff retention.

Regarding retirements, King County Medic One established a policy to reserve sufficient funds to absorb retirement payouts without impacting operations. While it cannot mandate internal policies in partner agencies, the EMS Division is encouraging partner agencies to follow its example.

IMPACT: By working with the 28 partner fire agencies to develop and implement our recommended workforce planning strategies to manage a wave of retirements, the division averted an impending staffing crisis among personnel responsible for saving lives in King County.¹

Recommendation 2

On August 2, 2019

DONE



Recommendation 3

PROGRESS



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: The division made a lot of progress on this recommendation in 2021 and early 2022, but its momentum slowed in the past year. In 2022, the division and its regional partners collaborated with the Washington State Fire Chiefs Association on a state-wide survey of race and gender representation in fire and emergency medical agencies, however division leaders stated they have not had the capacity to review the results yet. They said they plan to compare the 2022 data from King County agencies to a 2020 survey collecting baseline race and gender data to see if there have been improvements.

¹ The [original 2017 audit](#) found that despite the fact that nearly 30 percent of King County’s Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) and paramedic workforce would be eligible for retirement by the end of the 2014– 2019 levy period, agencies did not have plans in place for how to handle retirement payouts, recruitment, and training. By late 2020, EMT position vacancies exceeded the levels anticipated in the 2020–2025 levy strategic plan.

At the time of our audit (2017), about 93 percent of EMTs and paramedics in King County were male and 80 percent were White. The 2020 survey found that 91 percent of staff were male, and 84 percent were White, indicating some progress in terms of gender but a less racially diverse workforce. As of the 2020 baseline survey, only 64 percent of King County agencies (18 of 28) collected race data, obscuring a full picture of diversity in King County’s emergency medical workforce.

Since then, the division and its partners have encouraged the remaining agencies to collect, analyze, and report race data according to our recommendation and the detailed guidelines in the 2021 Toolkit for Increasing Diversity in Fire & Emergency Services. Division leaders did not have an update on the number of agencies that currently collect and maintain race and gender data but said that they are continuing to encourage partner agencies to embrace diversity, equity, and inclusion best practices which include the collection of race and gender data.

The division’s September 2022 Annual Report profiled community programs that intended to increase the number of diverse applicants for fire and EMS positions, but it did not report race and gender data of applicants and staff, either in aggregate or by agency.

WHAT REMAINS: To complete this recommendation, the EMS Division should take steps to increase the number of partner agencies providing race and gender data on their staffs and applicants and publish these data in its annual report.

Recommendation 4	On August 2, 2019	DONE 
Recommendation 5	On August 2, 2019	DONE 

Luc Poon 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.