

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Emergency Medical Services (EMS) System in the City of Bellingham and Whatcom County is rapidly approaching a critical juncture in its long, proud history of state-of-the-art operations and medical care. Whatcom County, and other jurisdictions around the country are faced with the increased challenges of providing emergency medical services (EMS).

The Whatcom County EMS Strategic Planning Committee conducted a comprehensive strategic planning process, using an independent public safety consulting firm, TriData Corporation of Arlington, VA, to facilitate the process and to assist in the analyses. This report represents the results of the process – a strategic plan for Whatcom County EMS going into the future.

This plan addresses the EMS system in its entirety. It includes the Medic One program; countywide first response with EMT's or first responders as provided by the 17 fire protection districts; dispatch; and many other components.

The Medic One Advanced Life Support program, operated by the Bellingham Fire Department and funded jointly by both the County and City, has been operating at a high level. Medic One has been one of the most successful integrations of pre-hospital care model into a public safety setting, with medical save rates consistently among the best nationwide. The citizens, political leadership, medical leadership, fire department leadership, and medical providers have embraced the sophisticated training demands required to function as a dual-role/cross-trained firefighter/paramedic, and should be extremely proud of the program's achievements.

In order to maintain excellence, the Medic One program and Whatcom County EMS needs a sound future plan to keep up with the ever-changing medical and operational environment. Since the tragic events on 9/11, this has become a new reality.

The strategic planning committee met monthly from January 2002 to June 2002, and adopted a consensus building approach. The committee believes that consensus building is preferable to a majority rules voting practice. The committee is pleased to report that the new strategic plan accurately represents the goals and objectives of the committee's representation. The committee structure gave all stakeholders and citizens

an opportunity to provide input. TriData also conducted independent reviews of the EMS system component capabilities so as to provide expert opinions during the issue discussions.

Current Setting

The 17 fire protection districts of Whatcom County do not have uniform capabilities for the provision of EMS services. Some of the departments have more sophisticated service delivery than others, mainly a function of population density and call volume. Some fire districts are more ready than others to assume a larger role in the provision of EMS countywide, which is to be expected. Volunteer retention issues are very much a part of this dynamic and are discussed fully in this plan.

It is not uncommon to find counties operating with as many fire districts as Whatcom County currently hosts, because fire protection started as a local community-based service. In an era when community spirit and volunteerism are often difficult to find, communities should be encouraged to coalesce around any community institution they see fit to use. Each fire service agency should work toward maintaining the local identity and characteristics of the fire districts while working together toward a common goal.

Although there is no imminent operational crisis facing the Medic One program that would jeopardize its daily operations over the next one to three years, the entire EMS delivery system is rapidly reaching a funding security “fork in the road” that requires the entire community to make a choice – whether to continue with the present level of coordination or coordinate services more closely, and to fund them more equitably.

The problem lies in the ever-increasing costs and training requirements of delivering state of the art fire suppression and emergency medical services. Economies of scale offer a substantial benefit to those that bear the financial burden. Indeed, the future of sound, secure, and cost effective pre-hospital care funding is the most immediate and pressing issue. Funding is the issue that currently requires the most attention. The operational, medical, and public safety aspects of service are all in excellent condition, but will not be able to maintain it without adequate funding.

Plan Overview

The most important recommendation of the Whatcom/Bellingham Joint Strategic Planning Committee is that the County and City should support instituting an EMS Tax Levy to assure adequate resources for the future. It is recommended that the levy be imposed for six years. The minimum levy required to sustain the EMS system and Medic One program for the next 6 years would be 32 cents per \$1,000 of assessed valuation. This includes the cost of adding one additional medic unit to the system, compensating for the pending Medicare reimbursement declines, and inflation. A somewhat higher levy would allow improving the system (e.g., having a more sophisticated BLS program) and not remain status quo. The levy has to be on the ballot no later than November of 2003, which is the amount of time the County can sustain its current payment to the EMS system. (Of course, a March 2003 vote is also acceptable.)

The distribution plan for levy funds should have the following characteristics:

- The plan must be fair to all entities;
- The current model for delivering EMS (i.e., a fire- and service-based system) would remain unchanged; and,
- Billings and collections for ambulance transport would continue and remain an integral part of the funding.

In addition to the major recommendation to impose an EMS Tax Levy, the strategic EMS plan calls for:

- A proposed design of an organization to coordinate and distribute funds;
- Better ALS and BLS integration between the County and City, with incentives to reduce the total number of fire districts; and,
- Solutions to the volunteer recruitment and retention problems.

The details of the four major recommendations of this plan are discussed and described in the “Critical Issues” section of this plan. Additional recommendations are found in the section entitled “Key Strategic Areas.”

Summary of Recommendations

The most important recommendations in the report are listed below. There are other suggestions and recommendations throughout the text.

- 1) Pass an EMS tax levy for a six-year period.
- 2) Create an interlocal cooperative agreement among the 17 fire protection districts.
- 3) Build the Bellingham/Whatcom County EMS System Partnership.
- 4) Construct a distribution formula to allot the funds from the levy.
- 5) Rejuvenate and sustain countywide volunteer recruitment programs.
- 6) Consider using excess funds to fund programs and positions that benefit all participants in the system, should extra funds be identified.