

Investigation looks at stresses on Iowa's EMS system



From the Editor
Carol Hunter
Des Moines Register
USA TODAY NETWORK

All Iowans owe a debt of gratitude to the volunteers who provide emergency medical services across the state. Literally

thousands of Iowans through the years owe their very lives to these volunteers. Close to half of EMS

providers in Iowa are all-volunteer, and 19% are staffed with both paid and unpaid EMTs and paramedics, according to statistics from the Iowa EMS Association.

But Iowa's patchwork network of public, private, paid and volunteer EMS providers is increasingly stressed, Des Moines Register reporters Daniel Lathrop and Philip Joens found in a two-part investigation that starts today.

The genesis of this reporting dates to January, when our staff was planning coverage to mark the third-year anniversary of the coronavirus's detection in Iowa. Daniel looked at a little-known federal database, the National Emergency Medical Services Information System, to get a sense of the pandemic's impact on EMTs and paramedics, who staff the front lines of the fight.

What he discovered: Calls for ambulances were surging nationwide, even though they weren't documented as related to COVID-19 cases, and the time it took for help to arrive was rising. A government source confirmed seeing the same trend.

That began an eight-month journey to understand why.

Daniel requested anonymized details for our state, but Iowa officials balked, citing a policy that in the name of patient privacy bans the release of even aggregate data about counties or ambulance providers. What they did provide were state-level totals showing calls and response times are up in Iowa.



Close to half of EMS providers in Iowa are all-volunteer, and 19% are staffed with both paid and unpaid EMTs and paramedics, according to statistics from the Iowa EMS Association. BYRON HOULGRAVE/THE REGISTER

Philip, who, as a breaking news reporter, often interacts with emergency responders, was tapped to join the reporting. Interspersed with other assignments, Daniel and Philip interviewed dozens of EMS clinicians across the state, who told them that the system in Iowa faces unprecedented challenges.

Many problems are longstanding: Recruitment of volunteers who can respond to calls 24/7 has become increasingly difficult, especially in rural areas as population has declined. Employees can't repeatedly leave their jobs. A parent can't leave young kids unsupervised. Another complication: Securing the required medical training can cost tens of thousands of dollars.

A 2014 Des Moines Register investigation had found that some areas of rural Iowa were

virtually unserved by ambulance agencies. In the years since, the Legislature has taken steps to improve funding options.

But then came the pandemic, and problems deepened, Daniel and Philip found. Response times in rural Iowa have ticked up as call volume increased. And the worker shortage means EMS clinicians are in high demand for lucrative jobs in other industries. The continuing rise in emergency and nonemergency calls is burning out those who remain.

Interviews by Daniel and Philip with state and national experts and Iowa's providers also led to a disturbing conclusion: Because Iowa, like most other states, does not designate EMTs, paramedics and ambulances as "essential," Iowans literally have no guarantee that a call to 911 will bring help in time.

Today's report examines the EMS system's challenges in detail. Monday's report looks at potential solutions, including designating EMS as an essential service and funding it at least partially through tax dollars.

Unfortunately, it's all too easy to give emergency medical care little thought — until you or a loved one is awaiting an ambulance and every second feels like a lifetime. How to deliver and pay for emergency care deserves our thoughtful attention, before the system's problems themselves become an emergency.

Carol Hunter is the Register's executive editor. She wants to hear your questions, story ideas or concerns at 515-284-8545, chunter@registermedia.com, or on Twitter: @carolhunter.



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Defense seeks judge's removal in Cruz trial

ASSOCIATED PRESS

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. — Attorneys for Florida school shooter Nikolas Cruz asked for the judge in his murder case to remove herself on Friday, two days after she scolded them when they abruptly rested their case after calling only a fraction of their expected wit-

nesses.

The Broward Public Defender's Office said in a motion that Circuit Judge Elizabeth Scherer held a longstanding animosity toward lead defense lawyer Melisa McNeill.

The motion cited Florida's Judicial Code of Conduct that states a judge shall disqualify himself or herself if the judge's

impartiality might reasonably be questioned, including but not limited to instances where the judge has a personal bias or prejudice concerning a party or a party's lawyer. Defense attorneys said Scherer's repeated improper and unjustified attacks on the defense counsel undermine the public's confidence in the

judicial system and have also caused Cruz to fear that he will not receive a fair trial.

Prosecutors said in a response that Scherer has been respectful to both sides.

Cruz's attorneys had told the judge and prosecutors they would be calling 80 witnesses but surprisingly rested at the start of Wednesday's court session after calling only about 25 of them.

There were 11 days of defense testimony overall, the last two spotlighting experts about how his birth mother's heavy use of alcohol during pregnancy might have affected his brain's development and led to his murdering 17 people at Parkland's Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School four years ago.

BIRTHDAYS

Actor **Robert Blake** is 89. Singer-actor **Frankie Avalon** is 82. Guitarist **Kerry Livgren** (Kansas) is 73. Actor **Anna Deavere Smith** ("The West Wing") is 72. **Holly Robinson Peete** ("Hangin' With Mr. Cooper") is 58. Actor **Jada Pinkett Smith** is 51. Rapper **Xzibit** is 48.

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