

# Winthrop Ambulance Service

“Serving Winthrop, Wayne, Readfield, Mount Vernon, Fayette, Manchester, and Monmouth”

November 1, 2021

Hello community partners,

I am reaching out to you to give you an update on your EMS service, and the effects of the Pandemic and staffing shortage that is affecting the State. As you know we are approaching nearly two years since the start of the Pandemic. This has presented a wide range of challenges for EMS, from procuring personal protective equipment (PPE) that was scarce during the first year of the Pandemic, to the physical effects on personnel from such a prolonged event.

I am happy to say that Winthrop Ambulance has been able to continue to respond to calls, while keeping our staff and patients safe during this time. The service is well stocked with PPE, has a robust disinfection policy, and has been fortunate that nearly 100% of our staff is vaccinated. This is not to say that there have not been challenges, as there have been. Covid patient numbers have spiked the last two months, stretching the entire health care system to its limit. Calls for non-Covid related calls have spiked as a result of delayed primary care for patients as a result of the Pandemic and concern among the elderly to delay seeking medical attention. As a result, hospital emergency departments are overwhelmed, and hospital admission beds are scarce. This has caused much longer turnaround times for ambulances delivering patients to the emergency department, or delivery of some patients to the waiting room. To decrease exposure potential we have eliminated staffing at the Readfield Fire Station for now. Additionally, we are starting to see breakthrough cases of Covid among EMS providers.

All of this has had a direct effect on EMS staff throughout the State, and here at Winthrop. As I am sure you have read or seen on the local news, staffing levels in healthcare are under extreme duress and EMS is no exception. Stress, career changes, overwork, and repeated mandatory overtime at some departments has affected the staffing levels at every EMS agency in the State. As a result, full-time and per-diem staffing levels are at their lowest point that I have ever seen in 36 years of working in EMS.

As you might expect, staffing levels at Winthrop Ambulance have been challenged as well. We estimate that we have seen a 35% decrease in availability of per-diem personnel, and Full-time slots continue to go unfilled. We have needed to change scheduling matrixes, incur additional overtime, move management to staff trucks, and increase reliance on mutual aid when there are more calls than units available.

Because of this, there may be times where patients will wait longer for the arrival of an EMS unit as we have needed to clear them from the hospital to respond, or are dispatching mutual aid to respond if we are unavailable. While not ideal, these are extraordinary times that will challenge the system for the foreseeable future. Our goal is to maintain two on-duty ambulances at all times, but there will be times when only one is available for short periods. We are working with our mutual aid partners to guarantee continued smooth handover of these types of calls.

In the short-term we will need to work on retention of staff through increased wages in an effort to "stop the bleeding" within the industry. We are working on a strategy now to accomplish this, and there will of course be an effect on the upcoming year's budget. The use of a tiered type of EMS response may also be needed for the most effective use of on-duty Paramedic resources. The long term strategy for the entire EMS system is less clear, much like many industries in Maine. It will take a multi-layered approach to rebuild staffing numbers over a period of time.

I wanted to reach out to you and keep you abreast of the situation, and make myself available to meet with you or your boards to discuss the topic in more detail. Please feel free to reach out to me at any time with questions or concerns.

Thank you for your understanding, and your continued partnership.

Regards,

John Dovinsky  
EMS Director