

PITTSBURGH FUTURES COLLABORATIVE

Reframing a Challenge to Meet Emergency Care Needs of Pittsburgh Residents

THE CHALLENGE: OVERWORKED AND UNDERSTAFFED EMS

There's a shortage of paramedics and Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) nationally. Understaffed and overworked, the chronic shortage of paramedics in Pittsburgh has created a crisis. Mandated overtime for employees leads to burnout and safety issues among EMS.

A NEW APPROACH TO HEALTHCARE RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING

"We've never been able to get up to full staffing with paramedics or EMTs, just due to the nationwide trends as far as a lot of agencies across the nation are just short with pre hospital care," said Chief Amera Gilchrist, who stepped into her role as the lead of EMS services in 2023. "In public safety, there is a motto of, 'that's the way it's always been the way we've always done it,' even if the way we've always done it has not worked. So why keep on? Why stay on this virtual hamster wheel? Let's start thinking of new things and getting out there and challenging ourselves to do different things."

Gilchrist, using the model of habitual excellence, reframed the problem, focusing on finding ways to meet every emergency need within the current constraints.

Working with the union, the City of Pittsburgh negotiated changes to better staff EMS services and to increase the pipeline of professionals in the city, including:

Re-establishing Freedom House, a historic program with paid EMT training in partnership with the City. "The communities actually are an untapped resource," Gilchrist explained, "people in the community want the jobs that

Emergency Medical Technicians perform medical procedures on-site and in ambulances while transporting patients.

Emergency Medical Services is the organization that responds to emergency medical requests. EMS includes EMTs and paramedics.

Paramedics have more required training than EMTs and can treat more complicated procedures in the field.

they see however, they don't know how to obtain them." Freedom House has trained 3 classes EMTs with a 100% graduation rate.

Creating combo units, where a paramedic and EMT ride together in an EMS vehicle. Previously, vehicles were staffed with either two EMTs or two paramedics. An EMT can meet an estimated 80% of needs on the calls, while a paramedic is on-site to handle more complicated services.

Advanced EMTs, a certification between paramedics and EMTs, who receive a paid, 10-week training to advance their careers and offer more skills in the field. The program has an 87% success rate so far.

THE RESULTS: A TRAINING PIPELINE FOR EMS

In creating a pipeline for paid training and upskilling, the City of Pittsburgh directly addresses the healthcare worker shortage while generating new opportunities for residents and decreasing the strain on existing paramedics who are working forced overtime.

The innovative combo units also help alleviate forced overtime for current paramedics, thereby reducing burnout. Though relatively new, the combo units have shown promising results. In 2025, for the first time in memory, Saint Patrick's Day, which is typically the highest volume day of the year with the most paid overtime, EMS was able to have all units in service to meet the peak needs of the holiday while experiencing no forced overtime, thanks in part to the flexibility of combo units.

The percentage of regular hours and pay increased from 2024 to 2025, but the percentage of overtime hours and pay decreased. This shows that the efforts to recruit more EMS employees helped decrease the stressors of overtime work. The city paid more people at their regular rate and fewer people at time and a half.

"Just looking at and identifying the problems, looking at where there were issues in the past, and trying to fix those has been widely helpful and successful," said Gilchrist.

The principles that Pittsburgh Futures taught were used by the Chief of EMS and their leaders to address the root cause of EMS staffing, creating a pipeline for future hires, reducing forced overtime, and workforce burnout.