

Recommendations for ARPA Funds Appropriated by The Texas Legislature for EMS Education

Few other segments of the healthcare industry experienced the staffing challenges that were created by the COVID-19 pandemic than the Texas EMS industry. Almost every Texas EMS agency continues to experience significant staffing shortages due to EMS professionals being forced to quarantine due to repeated COVID-19 exposures. In addition, EMS professionals are leaving the field at a higher rate than ever due to burnout, the risk of COVID-19 exposure and new career opportunities outside of EMS that are able to offer higher salaries and other factors. The Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) released data indicating that only 27 percent of licensed Texas EMS professionals submitted a patient care report during the first eight months of 2021.

The 87th Texas Legislature Addressed the EMS Workforce Shortage

The 87th Texas Legislature recognized the EMS workforce crisis and appropriated \$21.7 million to create an EMS education and retention initiative in the third special session. In response, members of the Texas EMS community worked together to create a detailed plan to implement the EMS education and recruitment initiative.

Each component of the plan is critical to the success of the program, and the Texas EMS community's recommendations are as follows:

Recruitment and outreach campaign (proposed budget: \$1.5 million) - Texas needs more individuals to pursue EMS careers. While Texas has over 70,000 certified EMS personnel, only 20,000, or roughly 27%, actually work on ambulances. EMS agencies are losing staff to the petrochemical industry, mobile infusion companies, clinics and even hospitals. In many cases, EMS professionals are simply leaving the healthcare industry.

Many certified EMS personnel work on fire engines, and that provides a great service to communities. However, it leaves a void in terms of personnel to staff ambulances.

Solution: TEMSA recommends a professionally produced media campaign that is developed by a vendor experienced in targeting specific demographics. A similar campaign was utilized in Pennsylvania and was successful in growing their EMS workforce. We believe the campaign should include electronic media, social media, advertising time, public service announcements and any other venue for reaching potential targets. We expect the vendor to not only call upon their own expertise, but to utilize focus groups of the intended audience to develop the most effective campaign.

To ensure consistent messaging, we believe the website (discussed below), printed materials and any exhibit materials such as roll-up banners should have the same theme, logos and graphics as the campaign.

We respectfully request that stakeholders from the EMS community have an opportunity to review campaign proposals and have a voice throughout the final development.

Website and IT infrastructure (proposed budget: \$500,000): A website serves as a modern-day “storefront,” and it is critical for individuals to be able to turn to a high-level website to learn more about careers in the EMS industry. The website would provide detailed information about EMS careers, training levels, upcoming education, employment opportunities and the highlights of venturing into the EMS field.

Solution: We envision a website that embraces the messaging from the media campaign, and includes comprehensive and easy to navigate data about the different certification levels of EMS professionals, the skills utilized by each level, information about a day in the life of an EMS professional and testimonials from active, working medics. The website, coupled with a state-wide toll free telephone number, should offer information about upcoming courses by region (including distance learning courses) and EMS agencies willing to sponsor students for education. We expect the website to be able to capture contact information to allow for follow-up from workforce development professionals and provide reporting so stakeholders can see where the campaign is having the most impact.

To expedite this important part of the larger program, we strongly suggest assigning it to a regional advisory council (RAC) that has existing infrastructure to manage and support a website and call center, and who already has a working relationship with a website builder. STRAC would be worth strong consideration, but there may be other RACs positioned to manage this piece as well. In a separate document, we will define the suggested deliverables for the website and call center.

Regional workforce development initiative (proposed budget: \$2.2 million over two years): EMS is competing with industry, law enforcement, fire, the military and others with staffing needs for the same pool of workforce talent.. Yet the in-person recruitment and outreach effort has been lacking, especially in rural areas. Many agencies, already short-staffed, do not have the human capital or budget to meet with graduating high school seniors, young adults looking for careers or job placement centers.

Solution: We envision a network of workforce development efforts managed by Regional Advisory Councils in separate regions around the state. We expect these efforts to result in established relationships with any and all potential referral sources for EMT students, attendance at career day functions and an aggressive pursuit of opportunities to present the idea of EMS careers to potential candidates. At all times, this effort should be working to build the pipeline of EMS professionals. In many areas, the RAC may be able to partner with a local EMS agency for site visits, equipment demonstrations and other presentations. The RAC staff managing this effort should be familiar with the EMS agencies in their areas and their staffing needs, as well as all education opportunities.

We feel that keeping up-to-date information on the recruitment website will be key to the success of the program, and the best source of information for each region will be the RACs. We recommend that, as part of the development of the website, we create clear templates that will be consistent for all users. The templates will be used to update information in a consistent manner across the state on upcoming courses and current employment opportunities.

While the funding does not allow for an FTE in each RAC to complete this mission, we believe that by utilizing partnerships among neighboring RACs, sharing of best practices and an efficient and well-designed web presence along with an agreed-upon list of key performance indicators, the RACs can effectively provide coverage to the state for this effort, ensure we are successful and still remain within budget.

EMS educator incentives (proposed budget: \$5 million): To create more EMTs, we need more EMT courses. And we need quality programs that see students not only pass the course, but also pass the National Registry test. We are interested in rewarding and supporting new efforts, not propping up or rewarding a program for doing the same thing it's always done. Through grants, we expect to offer support for programs that are willing to teach new courses or more courses. If a program would teach more students but for the need for an instructor salary, or teaching materials, or textbooks or some other barrier, we are in support of offering a grant to assist. The grant application should have clearly identified accepted uses but should not be cumbersome to complete.

Solution: We should encourage the RACs to purchase a cache of training equipment to be available for loan to education programs. This would allow for volume pricing and would also avoid a situation where grant funds are expended for equipment purchases, only to have the program fail to teach additional courses. Partnering with the RACs for the purchase, storage and management of this equipment will help not only traditional in-person EMS courses, but also hybrid and distance learning courses. We believe individual education programs should be allowed and encouraged to apply for grants for necessary instructor pay, textbooks, classroom space or any other needs that would enable more courses.

What's more, nursing programs have seen a return on investing in nursing schools by rewarding those that graduate nurses who can pass their state boards. We believe there is value in offering incentives for those EMS education programs that graduate students who then pass the National Registry test. The better the performance, the better the reward.

We are proposing the schedule included below for performance-based bonus incentives. The pass rate reflects the course's pass rate after 60 days and gives more weight to rural and frontier areas. For purposes of this program, we are defining rural as counties of greater than 25,000 but less than 50,000 people and frontier as counties of less than 25,000 people. We suggest that 60 days after course completion, the course coordinator submit a request for the incentive bonus indicating the number of students who have passed and the pass rate. For hybrid and distance learning courses, it will be the coordinator's responsibility to document the classification of each student as frontier, rural or urban based upon the student's home address.

We believe these funds should be available up to the total expense of \$1 million, regardless of the numbers of students in any one category.

Performance Based Incentives

| | 85% Pass Rate | 60% Pass Rate | 50% Pass Rate |
|----------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| EMT | | | |
| Frontier | 175 | 105 | 78.75 |
| Rural | 150 | 90 | 67.5 |
| Urban | 125 | 75 | 56.25 |
| EMT - A | | | |
| Frontier | 325 | 195 | 195 |
| Rural | 300 | 180 | 180 |
| Urban | 275 | 165 | 165 |
| EMT-P | | | |
| Frontier | 550 | 330 | 247.5 |
| Rural | 525 | 315 | 236.25 |
| Urban | 500 | 300 | 225 |

EMS education tuition reimbursement (proposed budget: \$12.5 million): We believe that given the current staffing emergency, we should try to remove barriers to EMS education. EMS offers a career path for those who choose to pursue it, but also offers a strong foundation for many who start in EMS and use their experience as a springboard to other healthcare careers. But we feel the cost of tuition is often enough to discourage interested candidates.

Solution: Our plan includes the cost of tuition for approximately 2,500 new certified personnel, or about a ten percent increase in the ambulance workforce. To allow all EMS agencies an opportunity to take advantage of this program, we are proposing that students who wish to take advantage of the tuition reimbursement MUST be sponsored by an EMS agency. While the funding will come from the ARPA dollars dedicated to this program, the trigger will be sponsorship by an EMS agency to qualify. Failure to pass the course, or to complete the work commitment will require the student to pay back any funds expended on his or her behalf. This approach will help ensure alignment with the Texas Legislature’s stated intent to focus on EMS professionals “that provide care on an ambulance.”

As these funds are allocated by the state with the expressed purpose of increasing staffing for EMS agencies, we strongly recommend that any candidate who utilizes funds from this program to complete an EMS education program and achieve certification at any level should be required to work on an ambulance an average of at least 24 hours per week on a rolling four week average for a minimum commitment of two years or risk having their certification revoked by the state. We feel the risk of losing certification as an EMT is the best enforcement of honoring the commitment.

Although these numbers may be somewhat fluid, we propose the following breakdown:

| | |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Paramedic Distance Learning | 500 students at \$8000 per person |
| Traditional Paramedic Education | 500 students at \$8000 per person |
| EMT-Advanced Education | 500 students at \$3200 per person |
| EMT-Basic | 1000 students at \$2000 per person |

To be clear, we want to use every dollar possible to support education for EMS professionals who work on ambulances. If there is more interest in one category and less in another, we are comfortable with adjusting the budget as long as every dollar is used as intended, which is to provide more EMS education for ambulance staffing.

We feel there may be value in utilizing the RACs to approve sponsorships by employers and release tuition funds to the education providers. The RACs will likely incur an administrative burden, but we expect they would be able to manage this more efficiently and expeditiously and at a lower cost than DSHS. We want to clearly establish the process and structure for RACs to be reimbursed for administrative costs related to managing their roles in this program. There are funds included in the \$12.5 million budgeted for tuition reimbursement to assist with administrative costs. Funds may be distributed through traditional RAC funding with priority going not to population, but to the directive from the legislature to prioritize rural and underserved areas.

It is critical to ensure that education costs are marked at current market rate to allow for the maximum use of the funding provided in SB 8. We suggest establishing a maximum reimbursement rate to adequately cover costs based upon the region's average or typical costs for existing EMS education programs. While programs may choose to charge whatever they wish, the state should only reimburse up to the schedule established.