

## It's not easy being an emergency worker in Oregon — WesternU students

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*Corey Knipstein talks about his road to becoming a firefighter as he puts on his fire jacket. Knipstein referred to himself as “old,” meaning he is one of the most tenured emergency medical personnel at his station. Jess Hume-Pabtuso, Mid-Valley Media*

Just before the holidays, students at the Western University of Health Sciences partnered with Lebanon fire officials to publish a report on the challenges facing Oregon's emergency service workers.

Among the challenges reported in the white paper were: recruiting enough applicants, training the workforce, and responding to the needs of an aging rural population.

The report is product of a [service-learning program between the Lebanon Fire District and the medical school](#), called the WesternU Lebanon Fire District Emergency Alliance, or WLEA (pronounced "wheelie") for short.

Students drafted the report on behalf of the fire district and the Oregon State Ambulance Association, according to a WesternU news release about the white paper.

Lebanon Division Chief of Operations John Tacy, a member of the Oregon Ambulance Association, said the report was based on a position paper he coauthored with other fire chiefs. He said having WesternU medical students take a deeper dive with the white paper was a great opportunity.

"I hope that it has some positive impact," Tacy said, even if it only brings awareness to the problems EMS workers face.

Those issues include an EMS workforce shortage fueled by concerns over low wages and burnout, according to the report.

Survey responses from ambulance agencies show fewer job hunters are applying for EMS positions, with many citing low pay. That's in addition to the accompanying burnout for a job that routinely places paramedics in stressful life-and-death situations, according to the report.

The report also says recruiting EMS workers in rural areas is particularly challenging and points to the practices of departments in urban areas attracting applicants away from rural communities with the promise of higher wages.

Then there are the higher operating costs for delivering emergency care to rural communities, according to the report. Factors include the longer distances ambulances may have to travel in rural areas and the smaller pools of qualified emergency responders within those communities, which can boost staffing costs.

Around 64% of EMS agencies in Oregon are rural, according to the Oregon Health Authority, a figure that encompasses rural and frontier counties. A frontier county is a county with six or fewer people per square mile.

Rural areas tend to have more people who are 65 and older compared with urban communities, the report notes, leading to a higher number of EMS calls. According to the report, 13.7% of rural populations in Oregon are 65 and older, compared with 9.6% of urban populations.

With a [population of around 10,000](#), or about half of Lebanon's, Sweet Home [recently opened a new Samaritan Health Services medical center](#), partly to address urgent care needs for their rural population. Along with a new retail pharmacy, the medical center hosts a helipad.

Students who contributed to the report at WesternU's College of Osteopathic Medicine of the Pacific Northwest also volunteer as EMTs, firefighters and first responders with the Lebanon Fire District, according to the WesternU news release.

Tacy said the partnership not only helps students meet graduate requirements but offers them insight into the work of emergency responders.

"It gives them a real valuable look, or picture, into it," he said.

Jeannie Davis, assistant professor of population health at WesternU, noted students' first-hand knowledge.

"Working with the Lebanon Fire District, students have seen and experienced the strain of health care on EMS in Oregon, and their research into these issues will make a significant impact in the community and in the state of Oregon," she said in a news release.