Rural Health Essay

By Olivia Bohl

EMS agencies in rural areas across the country are facing shortages of EMS personnel—that’s right, the same people who arrive at a moment’s notice after you fumble with your phone, dialing those three numbers that have always made you feel safe, knowing someone is coming to help. The same people who rush to your aid to make sure that your child gets to the hospital on time after collapsing on the floor, struggling to breathe. Time is of the essence. Emergency responders are always there… until they’re not. To relieve tensions surrounding the shrinking EMS workforce, significant changes need to occur, including encouraging involvement in the community and education systems, increasing compensation for existing staff members, and adding incentives to draw in both workers and volunteers.

The heart of the issue lies in the perception of EMS personnel and the work that they do. A common misconception is that these workers simply transport people to the hospital or serve as “hospital taxis,” when in reality, they are the first to provide life-saving care to the patient. Furthermore, their training goes far beyond driving an ambulance—in fact, EMS staff may receive equal to if not more training than some nurses. To combat misconceptions, EMS agencies need to get more involved in their communities. By visiting classrooms in local elementary, middle, and high schools, EMS personnel can educate students on what their job involves and the benefits of volunteering. EMS agencies can also host field trips to hospitals and EMS garages so that students can see the job environment as well as the ambulances and equipment. Until education and submersion in the EMS field are incorporated into local schools and colleges, the recruitment of new volunteers and workers will be difficult.

Another way of keeping existing staff and volunteers—and attracting new ones—is acknowledging the immense value of the unique services they provide. Current EMS workers deserve proper compensation for all that they do for the community. Raising wages, offering opportunities for further education, and reducing working hours can help EMS agencies keep the workers they hire. The training and time commitment, especially for volunteers, are common reasons why many people choose not to get involved in EMS services. By rewarding volunteers for their effort, there will be a significant boost in overall interest and involvement. Examples include paid leave from their other jobs, gift cards to local businesses, free high school or college credits, and student loan forgiveness. These incentives will attract the younger generation—the future workforce—and will be especially effective if introduced in high schools and colleges.

I spoke with a local paramedic, who believes that it all comes down to respect and value. Until incentives and rewards are incorporated to bring in more volunteers and staff, the workforce will continue to diminish in the years to come. Unless all EMS personnel receive fair treatment, compensation, and working hours, there may be a day when 911 dispatches go unanswered.