

EMS in Ulster County: Challenges and Solutions

March 26, 2025

Ulster County’s Emergency Medical Services (EMS) face major challenges that have been developing over many years. While we have robust coverage in many areas of the County, we also have distressing gaps in certain geographic areas, due to well-documented challenges of recruiting and retaining EMS personnel and rising costs. At the same time, the proportion of the population that is over 65 continues to increase, placing increased demands on an already strained system.

The EMS infrastructure in Ulster County is a mix of fire department first responders (non-transport), Basic Life Support (BLS) agencies that can be volunteer-based, a combination of volunteer and paid, or paid organizations; and Advanced Life Support (ALS), which can be municipal or commercial agencies. BLS and ALS have different roles to play in the system of emergency medical response. ALS includes a paramedic and comes into play when a higher level of medical care is required, such as in the case of a heart attack or stroke. ALS calls account for the majority of dispatched calls in Ulster County — about 65%.

Unlike local governments, the County government does not have the authority to create taxing jurisdictions. However, the County can play a central coordinating role in the provision of emergency services countywide and can assist in a variety of ways to close gaps in service delivery and strengthen the system of emergency transport and care.

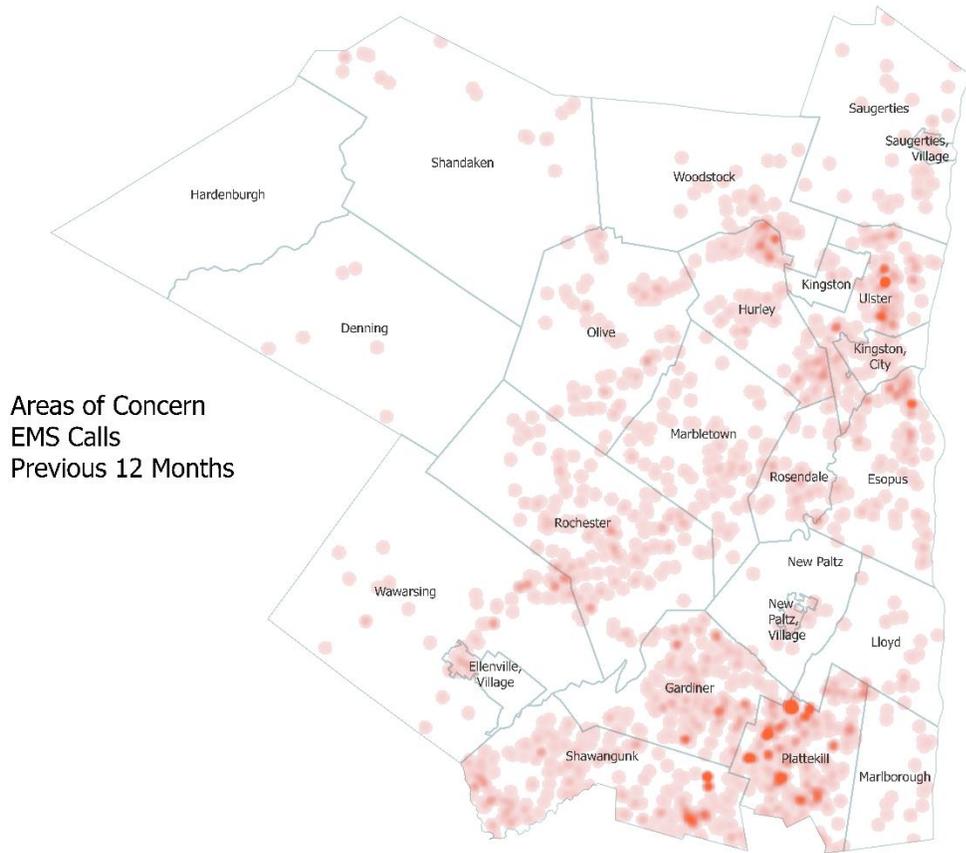
Challenge: Gaps in EMS Service

“EMS in Ulster County is at a crossroads. Many EMS agencies are struggling to maintain service levels for their local communities, often relying on neighboring jurisdictions for an EMS response. Our analysis of ambulance responses in the county reveals that six of the 17 ambulance agencies (35%) are responding to less than 70% of their calls. Due to the challenges facing rural EMS providers across the country, and feedback from community stakeholders in Ulster County, these challenges are likely to increase in the future.”

— Center for Public Safety Management, LLC’s **EMS Services Delivery Report**, Ulster County, 2024

Ulster County is facing significant gaps in EMS service in areas of the county — particularly with ALS response, which can be a matter of life or death.

See the heat map, below, illustrating service gaps.



Solution:

Ulster County will take a comprehensive, multi-phased approach to closing gaps designed to incorporate the existing EMS provider agencies within the County. The County Legislature has authorized the Department of Emergency Services to apply for a Municipal Certificate of Need (Muni-CON) through the State Department of Health, which will enable the County to partner with local EMS agencies for ALS coverage of targeted areas. In the near term, the cost of these contracts to extend coverage by ALS agencies will be shared between the County and the municipalities served. Regional EMS taxing jurisdictions should be considered in the future to ensure the long-term financial sustainability of the EMS system. (See the next section on funding.)

In addition to extending ALS service by existing agencies to underserved areas, the County is also investing in programs to support a higher level of care by BLS service agencies. County Executive Metzger's 2025 Executive Budget includes a \$500,000 grant program for EMS transporting agencies to

purchase equipment needed to enhance patient care on the scene and in transport. The County Executive also included new training and certification programs, outlined further below.

Challenge: Lack of Sustainable Funding Model to Cover Costs of Readiness

“The costliest component of ambulance service delivery is the cost of readiness, that is, staffing units that are not on a call, to be available, to respond in a reasonable time. This option will require the county to staff, or contract for, a single ALS ambulance 24 hours/day, 365 days a year. It is typical in rural EMS systems that the potential revenue generated from user fees will be less than the cost of staffing the ambulance, which would require funding from non-user fees to sustain the safety net model. However, there are operational efficiencies in economies of scale where larger areas are covered by that one unit.”

— Center for Public Safety Management, LLC, **EMS Services Delivery Report**, Ulster County

Maintaining a state of EMS readiness requires adequate funding to ensure that BLS and ALS can respond promptly and deliver high-quality patient care. When EMS is not adequately funded, it can lead to poor readiness, resulting in longer response times and inadequate care levels. These delays and lack of advanced care can adversely affect patient health outcomes and increase overall healthcare costs within the community.

EMS costs include insurance, vehicles, fuel, patient care equipment (including repair and replacement), capital costs (including the physical building to house EMS), administrative & operational costs, personnel (salaries and benefits), medical supplies, training, and uniforms, among other costs.

Reimbursement for EMS agencies falls far short of covering the cost of providing services. Medicaid pays less than one-third of the cost for an ambulance call, leaving volunteer and paid agencies to subsidize hundreds of dollars per call. Adding to the challenges, Medicaid enrollment has significantly increased (45,249 enrollees in 2014 to 69,106 enrollees in 2021*) while private insurance enrollment has decreased, negatively affecting the payer mix. With no substantial increase in Medicaid reimbursement, sustaining an EMS agency is extremely difficult.

Solution:

In the near term the County is proposing to provide financial support to help fund core EMS services throughout the County. This funding would support existing EMS service agencies for the cost of readiness, while also supplementing support by municipalities and municipal EMS agencies for essential EMS coverage.

- **Cost of Readiness:** \$2.8 million is proposed to be provided to ALS Anchor Agencies to support their cost of readiness. Simply put, these are existing ALS agencies within the County that have, in concert with their municipality, made the commitment to upgrade their service level to become ALS providers, and have demonstrated the ability to provide that service reliably, with consistent levels of competence and quality. These Anchor Agencies maintain a response rate of 95% or higher in their primary response jurisdiction.
- **EMS Reliability funding:** Most towns have contracted with an agency to provide essential coverage within their townships. The County is proposing to provide \$1.6 million in additional support for this core coverage level. A few towns have contracted with commercial EMS agencies, and in these instances, funding will be disbursed to the town to support the terms of their contract. In all other cases, funding will be disbursed directly to Anchor EMS agencies serving as critical response hubs, providing Advanced Life Support (ALS) coverage and supplemental Basic Life Support (BLS) services to municipalities lacking sufficient resources. Similar to the Cost of Readiness funding, these agencies must maintain a response rate of 95% or higher in their primary response jurisdiction.

In the future, Ulster County will seek to facilitate regional EMS taxing jurisdictions in partnership with municipalities to fund the EMS services. This is the fairest and most reliable approach to funding EMS service for the long term, based on the regional coverage level.

Challenge: Decline in EMS personnel/volunteers over time

“EMS systems across America are struggling. The staffing and economic crisis in EMS are exceptionally challenging for rural EMS systems. Since 2021, 64 EMS agencies in the United States have closed due to the combination of staffing and funding challenges. Volunteers are becoming especially difficult to find to help provide reliable EMS services and communities are facing difficult decisions regarding ambulance service availability, with many needing to provide additional funding to help ensure essential ambulance service delivery.”

— Center for Public Safety Management, LLC, **EMS Services Delivery Report**, Ulster County

Solution:

County Executive Metzger included several initiatives in her 2025 Executive Budget designed to expand the pool of trained EMS professionals in Ulster County and incentivize service in the field. These initiatives include:

- Ulster County, in partnership with SUNY Ulster, is seeking approval to offer EMS certification programs. The County will also incentivize certification and service in the field with a work-study stipend, modeled on the State Fire Training Stipend.

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- The Department of Emergency Services has created a new EMS Training Unit, similar to the Department's Fire Training Unit, to provide an increased level of training.
- The Department is working toward becoming an NYS Course Sponsor for EMTs, which will broaden the County's training capabilities by offering New York State Emergency Medical Technician Basic (EMT-B) certification classes.
- In Fall 2025, the Department will offer EMS agencies training in the use of EMT Adjuncts such as epi-pens, aspirin, albuterol, continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP), perform blood glucometry, obtain 12-lead ECG's, and use supraglottic airways. This initiative will raise the level of training of our EMTs and provide grant opportunities for BLS agencies to obtain patient care monitoring equipment.
- To recertify their EMT-B & Paramedic certification, practitioners need to attend Continuing Medical Education (CME) classes on a variety of topics. The EMS Division will offer a variety of CME topics throughout the year.

Continuous Monitoring, Collaboration, and Improvement

The County will establish the Ulster County EMS Enhancement and Sustainability Committee to continue to work collaboratively with our partners to raise the level of emergency care for our residents. The committee will be led by our Department of Emergency Services and will include representatives from the Ulster County Legislature, the Association of Town Supervisors and Village Mayors, Ulster County EMS Council, Ulster County Fire Chiefs Association, and our local hospitals.

Additional Resources

- **Ulster County EMS Service Delivery Report**, Center for Public Safety Management, LLC, 2004
<https://ulstercountyny.gov/sites/default/files/EMS-Report-3-26-24.pdf>
- **NYS 2023 Evidence Based EMS Agenda for the Future**
https://www.health.ny.gov/professionals/ems/docs/february_2023_sustainability_tag.pdf
- **The Growing Role of Counties in Emergency Medical Services**, New York State Comptroller, Thomas P. DiNapoli, March 2024
<https://www.osc.ny.gov/files/local-government/publications/pdf/ems-report-2024.pdf>
- **2024 Update on the EMS Workforce Shortage: Where Are The Emergency Medical Responders?**
<https://nycremsco.org/2024-update-on-the-ems-workforce-shortage>

Visit *Participate Ulster* for updates and more information:

<http://participate.ulstercountyny.gov/ems-plan>