

- ***DHS proposes action to improve state EMS system***

An independent assessment by national experts has identified weaknesses in the state's emergency medical services system, public health officials in the Oregon Department of Human Services (DHS) said Monday.

DHS had requested the review through the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's technical assistance team, which in March sent emergency services and trauma systems experts to Portland to review DHS-provided materials and to gather testimony from key partners outside of state government.

"Their findings confirm our concerns," said Grant Higginson, M.D., DHS community health planning manager. "Oregon's emergency medical services system is fragmented, ineffective and lacks uniformity across the state. This report is a clear call to action and presents a roadmap for improvement."

The 46-page document identified a number of problems. Examples:

- The state's EMS lead agency lacks sufficient authority, funding and staffing to achieve centralized resource coordination of the state EMS system.
- Because state EMS lacks a medical director, there are no statewide minimum standards and protocols that local agencies can look to as they develop systems in their communities.
- There is a disparity of resources among frontier, rural and urban areas, and no clear plan for enhancing EMS services in frontier and rural Oregon.
- There are no consistent performance measures to evaluate the effectiveness of local and regional EMS plans.
- Access to continuing medical education for all levels of Emergency Medical Technicians (EMT) is inconsistent.
- The state EMS program lacks adequate staff to inspect all ambulance services and vehicles, even on a biennial schedule.


"None of this is unexpected, given the consistent reductions in resources over recent years," Higginson said. "Committed people are doing the best they can at both the state and local levels, but they have meager resources with which to work."

Higginson said that a similar 1992 expert assessment found that Oregon had a good EMS and trauma system that was on the verge of becoming great.

"This year's team was dismayed at the dramatic deterioration they found over the past 14 years," Higginson said. "We, too, are very concerned and welcome this as an opportunity to work vigorously to bring EMS back to its prior level."

DHS is already working on some of the problem areas that were identified and looking at how to prioritize issues for improvement. Specifically:

- The EMS director is participating on the state emergency interoperability committee that is working to ensure adequate communication among all public safety agencies.
- The EMS director is participating in health systems emergency preparedness planning activities within DHS.
- This month, the EMS program will begin developing a state EMS disaster preparedness plan.
- The EMS Mobile Training Unit will strengthen training opportunities for emergency medical technicians across the state, particularly in rural areas.
- DHS is working with members of EMS services throughout Oregon to determine how to best ensure that adequate planning, oversight and resources are available at both the state and local levels.

The Highway Safety Division of the Oregon Department of Transportation funded the assessment from a federal grant. The complete **2006 Oregon EMS NHTSA Reassessment** document can be downloaded [here](#)  (182K).