

WHATCOM COUNTY
EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
1500 N. State Street, Suite 205, Box 5
Bellingham, WA 98225



MEMORANDUM

To: Whatcom County Council
From: Deborah Arthur, EMS Manager
Through: Kayla Schott-Bresler, Deputy Executive
Satpal Sidhu, County Executive
Date: November 14, 2025
Subject: Commitment to Fiscal Accountability and Comprehensive EMS System Assessment

Summary

Through systemwide administrative coordination by Whatcom County Emergency Medical Services (WCEMS) and the operational expertise of the countywide Fire and EMS Agencies, Whatcom County continues to provide high-quality emergency medical care to the community. This integrated model supports strong cardiac survival rates, consistent response times, effective cross-agency collaboration, and evidence-based clinical performance throughout the EMS system.

At the same time, we recognize the County Council's responsibility to ensure that Whatcom County's EMS Levy funds are managed efficiently and transparently, in alignment with the community's expectations.

This memorandum affirms the WCEMS Administration's commitment to both immediate fiscal responsibility and a comprehensive assessment of EMS finances and operations supported by the County's EMS levy funds. This commitment is presented in support of the Council's consideration of the Executive's recommendation to authorize approval of approximately \$2.5 million in banked EMS levy capacity for the 2026 budget year.

Performance Highlights

The EMS system continues to demonstrate strong, measurable outcomes across the current levy period, including sustained high-quality patient care, efficient response times, and expanded community engagement. The following highlights summarize key program achievements:

- **Call Volume and Service Reach:**

In 2024, total EMS call volume exceeded 24,000, with patients served in every jurisdiction across Whatcom County. These numbers reflect the broad reach and responsiveness of our countywide EMS

system (see Appendix A, “911 Dispatch Call Volume by Type in 2024” and “911 Call Volume for EMS Services from 2020 to 2024”; see Appendix B, “2024 EMS Responses by Age Range”).

- **Cardiac Arrest Survival Rates, Community CPR, and Response Time:**

Survival from cardiac arrest depends on a rapid, coordinated response, from early recognition and bystander CPR to rapid defibrillation and advanced prehospital care. Whatcom County’s performance in each of these areas continues to rank among the best in the nation.

According to the CARES registry, Whatcom County’s Utstein survival rate, the international gold standard for EMS system performance, remains above the Washington State average and comparable to Seattle-King County Medic One, a long-standing national model.

A key driver is our community’s extraordinary willingness to act. Nearly 70% of witnessed cardiac arrests in Whatcom County receive bystander CPR prior to EMS arrival, the highest rate in Washington State and among the highest nationally. Early bystander CPR doubles or even triples survival and is a direct outcome of sustained public education and outreach.

From 2023 through October 2025, 654 residents completed CPR training provided through the WCEMS Administration office, expanding access and increasing instructional capacity with the addition of 29 new CPR instructors and more than 50 EMS evaluators. In addition, many Fire and EMS Agencies offer regular, low- or no-cost CPR training in their communities, reaching a significant number of residents. These WCEMS and agency-led programs, supported in part by annual BLS levy allocations, are a core component of local prevention efforts.

Speed matters most in cardiac arrest. Since adding the fifth medic unit in Lynden (2023), countywide median response times improved by 80 seconds. For cardiac arrest, each one-minute decrease in time to defibrillation is associated with roughly a 10% improvement in survival. This faster access to ALS care, combined with early bystander CPR, helps keep Whatcom County’s cardiac arrest survival among the highest in the United States. (see Appendix C, “Utstein Survival Rates and Comparison to WA State and to the National Average”; Appendix D, “Median Unit Response Time from Dispatch to Arrival on the Scene”).

- **Narcan Training, Distribution, and Overdose Outcomes:**

Over the current levy period, 877 community members were trained to recognize opioid overdoses and administer Narcan (naloxone), and 2,722 doses were distributed countywide.

The results are clear and measurable. Overdose-related 911 calls are at a five-year low, dropping from an average of 5 per day in 2024 to 2.1 per day in 2025. Transports for suspected overdoses also declined from 59% (2024) to 53% (2025), indicating more effective on-scene reversals, often before EMS arrives. Narcan administered prior to EMS arrival now accounts for 71% of all doses given on suspected opioid overdose calls, strong evidence of public engagement and training effectiveness. This includes six confirmed lives saved in which a trained community member successfully reversed an overdose, with additional unreported saves likely occurring across the county. (see Dashboards, [WCEMS website: EMS Data for live Opioid Overdose Data](#)).

These efforts align with countywide public health and safety priorities. The WCEMS Narcan training/distribution program directly supports the Whatcom County Justice Project and the County Executive's Executive Order on the Opioid Crisis, which emphasizes prevention, harm reduction, and interagency coordination to reduce overdose deaths. By equipping community members, law enforcement, and service providers with Narcan and overdose-response training, WCEMS plays a central role in implementing these initiatives and strengthening the county's continuum of care from emergency response through recovery support.

Together, these combined efforts demonstrate a coordinated and effective local response to the opioid epidemic, saving lives, reducing recidivism and emergency utilization, and building a more resilient community.

Background

In November 2022, Whatcom County voters approved the six-year EMS Levy renewal by 63.95%, authorizing a maximum rate of \$0.295 per \$1,000 of assessed valuation.

When the County Council adopted the initial 2023 budget, recently updated property values showed that taking the full voter-approved Levy Rate would generate more revenue than needed to operate the first year of the adopted six-year Levy Plan. The County Executive and the County Council instead approved a much lower Levy Rate (approximately \$0.252), leaving a significant portion of the voter-approved Levy funding uncollected. This amount of Banked Capacity could be available later in the current Levy period if the Council and Exec authorized its use.

Current Financial Context

Analysis presented to the WCEMS Oversight Board (EOB) and its Finance Subcommittee indicate that expenditures are increasing faster than revenues due to inflationary pressures, contractual obligations, and rising operational costs. These factors have created cash flow challenges for the WCEMS fund and, without further action, are projected to result in the fund balance being depleted below Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) standards before the end of the current levy cycle.

To maintain service stability and fund solvency, the EOB, EMS Finance Subcommittee, and EMS Technical Advisory Board (TAB) have all formally recommended that the County Council authorize the use of the full EMS Fund EMS Fund banked capacity beginning in 2026.

This recommendation reflects the collective judgment of EMS System partners and is supported by a data-driven financial analysis reviewed by the County Executive's Office.

In its October 10 EOB meeting, the EOB members reaffirmed their ongoing commitment to the WCEMS Fund and the Levy's long-term sustainable financial health.

Commitment to Comprehensive Assessment and Fiscal Accountability

The WCEMS Administration recognizes that authorization of the banked EMS Levy capacity represents a significant fiscal decision. To ensure transparency and accountability, we will initiate a comprehensive

assessment of all EMS levy-funded expenditures, revenues, and operations over the next year to confirm they are efficient, sustainable, and aligned with community needs.

This assessment will begin in early 2026 and will include the following components:

- **Alignment and Compliance Review:** Evaluate current programs, contracts, and operations against the adopted Levy Plan and voter intent.
- **Financial Analysis and Validation:** Examine revenues, expenditures, staffing levels, contracts, equipment, and reserve policies to ensure efficient use of levy funds. This will include the development and formal adoption of a new EMS reserve policy.
- **Program Effectiveness Review:** Measure outcomes, cost-benefit, and community impact of countywide EMS-funded programs to ensure they are meeting intended service and performance goals.
- **Oversight and Governance Evaluation:** Review the EMS administrative structure, reporting practices, and fiscal accountability, including the governance role of the EOB, and develop new bylaws for the EOB.
- **Prioritization Framework:** Develop a prioritized list of EMS expenditures and capital needs to guide funding discussions and policy decisions in advance of the 2028 levy renewal.
- **Final Summary and Recommendations:** Present findings and fiscal recommendations to the County Executive, County Council, and the EOB to support long-term sustainability and transparency.

This process will be led collaboratively by the Whatcom County EMS Administration, in partnership with the countywide Fire and EMS Agencies, with participation from the EOB, Finance Subcommittee, TAB, and other community stakeholders. It will be completed before the end of 2026 to allow ample time to develop the plan for the next levy renewal ballot proposal.

Conclusion

Whatcom County EMS System remains committed to maintaining exceptional emergency medical services while ensuring efficient, transparent, and accountable financial management of public resources. By authorizing the use of voter-approved Levy funding and the resulting banked capacity for 2026, the County will restore some of the needed revenue, allowing the System to continue delivering world-class benefits to our community.

The WCEMS Administration's commitment to this assessment reflects the shared goal of WCEMS, the countywide Fire and EMS Agencies, the EOB, the TAB, the Finance Subcommittee, and other key stakeholders: a sustainable, high-performing, and fiscally responsible EMS system for Whatcom County.

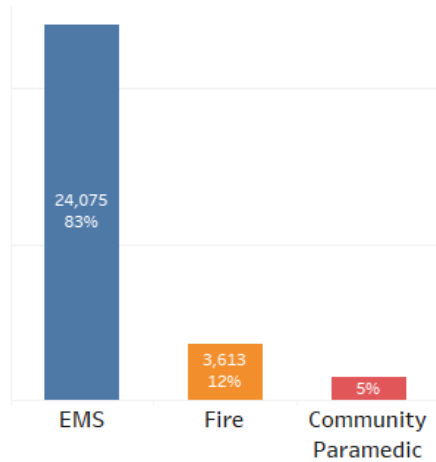
Recommended Action:

Acknowledge the commitment of the Whatcom County EMS Administration, working in partnership with the countywide Fire and EMS Agencies, to conduct a comprehensive system assessment beginning in 2026, and authorize the use of the full voter-approved banked EMS levy capacity for the 2026 budget year.

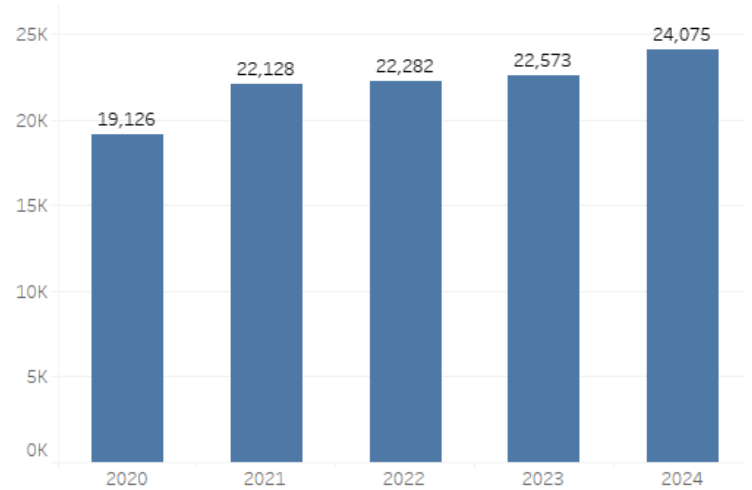
Appendix A: 911 Call Volume



**911 Dispatch Call Volume by Type
2024**



911 Call Volume for EMS Services



Appendix B: 2024 EMS Responses by Age Range

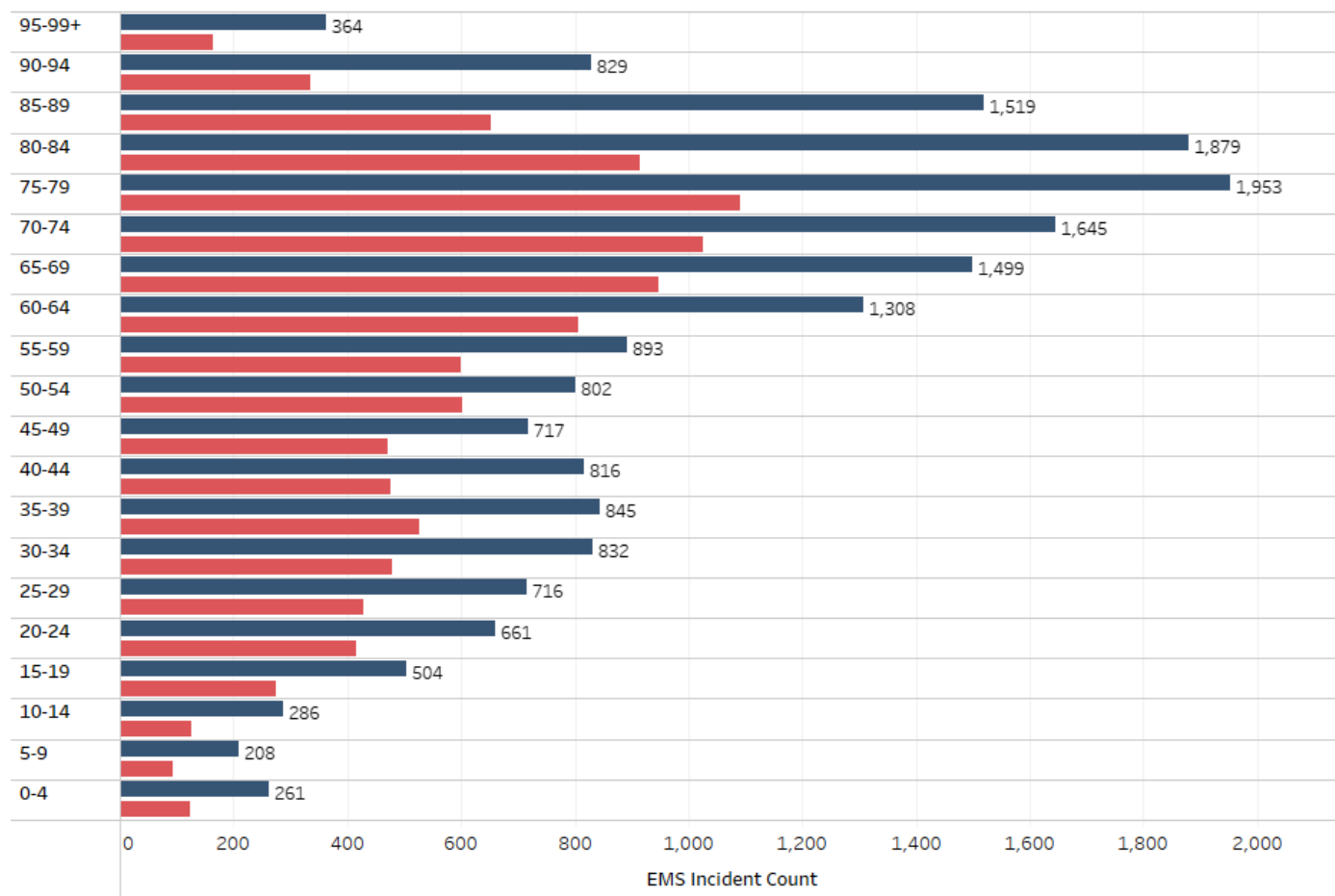


EMS Responses by Age Range 2024 EMS Responses

Resp Level Of Unit

Basic Life Support (BLS)

Advanced Life Support (ALS)



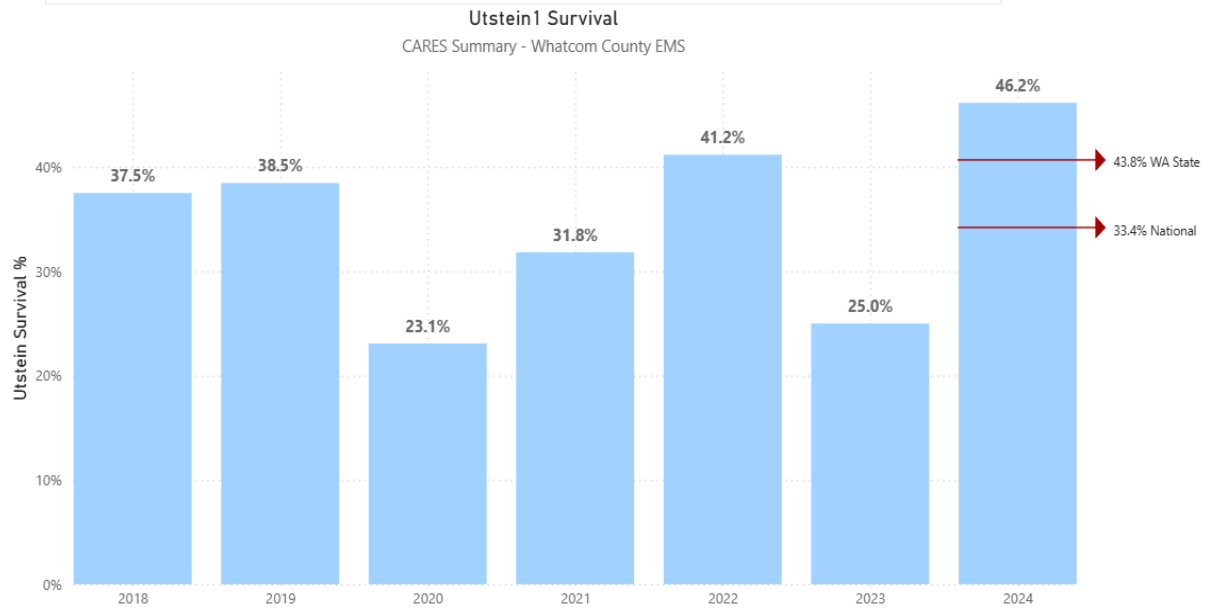
Appendix C: Utstein Survival Rates and Comparison to WA State and to the National Average



Utstein1 Survival Rates

Utstein1 is used worldwide as the gold standard indicator of how effective an EMS system's early CPR and defibrillation efforts are in saving lives. It is also widely considered a bellwether indicator of overall EMS system readiness and effectiveness.

Utstein1 survival shows the percentage of patients who leave the hospital alive after a witnessed cardiac arrest with a shockable rhythm, like ventricular fibrillation.



Appendix D: Median ALS Unit Response Time from Dispatch to Arrival on the Scene.



Median ALS Unit Response Time

Response Times (Dispatch to Arrived on Scene)
HH:MM:SS

