



MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

Debbie Von Seggern-Johnson



*NAEMT State Education Coordinator, Nebraska
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With a 140-mile round trip commute from her farm in North Bend, Nebraska to her job as EMS/trauma coordinator for the Center for Continuing Education at University of Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha, Debbie Von Seggern-Johnson is willing to go the distance for her community. When she's not at work or on the road, she makes time to serve as president of the Nebraska EMS Association and as an NAEMT state education coordinator. A mother of six in a blended family, she's also a firefighter/paramedic and physician surrogate for North Bend Fire & Rescue, a volunteer ALS service.

Von Seggern-Johnson spoke with NAEMT News about the family emergency that propelled her into EMS, what she loves about living on a ranch, and the importance of quality education for rural EMS practitioners.

Do you prefer to be called Deb or Debbie?

Whenever I say Deb, my patients think I'm saying 'dead.' So I go by Debbie.

When did you know that you wanted to go into EMS?

When my middle son Bryce was eight months old, he went into cardiac arrest due to a foreign body airway obstruction. It was the most terrifying feeling of my life. It was 1989. We were living in rural Kansas and there was no 911. My son was having trouble breathing. I was searching for the phone number of the hospital while my son's father was hitting his back and blowing in his mouth. It was during an ice storm. We got through to the hospital and they said they didn't have an ambulance to send. We'd have to drive ourselves in. It took an hour, and the whole way we were just trying to get him enough air to keep him alive.

Neither of us had any medical training, and we really didn't know what we were doing. My son made a full recovery. But afterward I went back to the hospital and took a class in CPR. I never wanted to be unprepared again.

A few years later I was working as a waitress and I was asked to take an EMT course. I fell in love with it – the brotherhood and sisterhood you develop working together and getting to know your community. I also became a CPR instructor and started teaching anyone I could. I didn't want any parent to be in the situation that I was in. You should at least have the ability to help yourself.

The worst situation, whether it's in EMS or your own house, is when somebody dies and you could have helped them. In all my years in EMS, I have never had a cardiac arrest save. Most of

the time, in a rural area by the time we get there, it's too late to bring them back. We're an hour away from the nearest cardiac, stroke or trauma center. But I do have one save – my own son.

Have you always lived in rural areas?

Oh yes. I was raised on a ranch in western Nebraska. We got real excited when we went to Columbus, Nebraska once a month. It had a population of about 20,000. My mom made our clothes. We canned our own food. My family still thinks it's weird I work in Omaha!

Today I live on a 10-acre hobby farm. We rescue animals. We have peacocks, guinea pigs, chickens, turkeys, geese, ducks, cats, dogs and fainting goats. My brother is a sod farmer. I tease him that he raises grass.

Did you say fainting goats?

Yes, we have about 20 of them. Fainting goats have a gene that when they're startled, they seize up and drop to the ground. They're not able to move for a few seconds. Then they get up and go back to normal. Fainting doesn't hurt them.

The babies faint really easily. It takes a little more to startle the adults. People drive by and honk and try to startle the goats to see them fall over.

Goats are just as sweet as dogs. My biggest baby is Gabby. For some reason her momma didn't like the female babies. One winter, she didn't take care of them and pushed them out of the barn where the heat lamp was. Gabby got frostbite on her hooves and we worked really hard to save her. She moved into our house. She wore a diaper for five months. She has twins of her own now.

What do you love about rural living?

Our neighbors are 1.5 miles away. They don't know what kind of toilet paper you use. But we still all know each other, and we're all there to help if needed. Plus we couldn't have our menagerie of animals if we lived in town.

What are your responsibilities as EMS/trauma coordinator at University of Nebraska Medical Center?

I work with everyone from Boy Scouts to physicians. We develop curricula in emergency medicine, cardiac care, stroke care and trauma care that's taught to a range of providers and the public. We conduct American Heart Association courses across the state, and coordinate 17,000 AHA certifications a year. We also train instructors to teach NAEMT courses. I love trying to solve an educational problem, fulfill a gap and make a difference.

Why are you involved in state level advocacy?

State EMS associations are the voice in front of the state legislators, other partners, associations and stakeholders. A lot of decisions about EMS are made at the state level, including licensure, protocols, rules and regulations. You need to present a unified voice.

Between your day job and other roles, you're busy. Why do you make time to serve as an NAEMT state education coordinator?

I took the first AMLS course taught in Nebraska and I remembered being wowed by it. AMLS totally resonates and hits the nail on the head as far as assessment and critical thinking skills. Rural providers don't get enough education opportunities. Many people are agriculture-based. They're taking care of their communities and they either don't want to go to the city for training or their communities can't afford to send them. So we need to bring the education to them. We're hoping to launch our first NAEMT Emergency Pediatric Care and EMS Safety courses too with funds from the state. I'm really excited about those.



What's one skill that every EMS practitioner should have?

Active listening. The one thing that kills us in EMS is we have our own agendas and silos. If we break down the silos, look to the future, be accepting of change and listen to others, it would be so awesome. The world would be better for our patients.

Why are you an NAEMT member?

Because of the mission and vision. Being an NAEMT member is an opportunity to be part of a group that supports education and change that will help EMS get where it needs to go in the future. NAEMT has been so good about developing partnerships with the fire service, police and government agencies. We can't move forward and make EMS better without those partnerships. And we also need the best education. Those two things are going to push EMS into the new generation.