

How a Small EMS Agency Built an Industry-Leading Safety Program

In 2020, Butler County EMS in El Dorado, Kansas, was named the inaugural winner of the EMS Safety Council's National Safety in EMS Award. The award recognizes an EMS agency for leadership in patient and practitioner safety.

With a clinical staff of 54 that includes 38 paramedics and 16 EMTs, Butler County EMS answers 6,700 calls annually in southern Kansas. Several years ago, as part of a countywide push to reduce workers' compensation costs, the Butler County EMS team decided to make safety a top priority.

"In our profession, we are in a high-risk environment everyday," said Butler County EMS Director Frank Williams. "The most important resource or asset we have is our people, who do the great work of applying their God-given skills and talent to help other people. Protecting them and focusing on protecting our patients is part of our job to serve our citizens."



Butler County EMS's attention to safety has paid off. The number and severity of work-related injuries has dropped, leading to declines in workers' comp costs. Safety programs have also helped to boost morale and retention at a time when it's sorely needed.

"Our crews know we have their best interests in mind. They know we are

doing everything we can, so that they are protected on the call and they can go home safe and well," Williams said.

Getting Started

Building a safety program has been a multi-year project. As a first step, they purchased power load and power cot systems to reduce back strain, added European-style (type 2) ambulances to the fleet and reconfigured interiors so crews can remain seated while treating patients and reaching equipment in transit.

With that accomplished, Williams felt they needed to do a better job including input from field providers. "Safety is what we as a team live and breathe," Williams said. "It has to be a culture, and our field providers have to have a voice and ownership of it."

As a next step, they established an internal safety committee, and invited practitioners from each shift, along with administrators, the medical director, and a quality director/data specialist, to participate. The agency also named its first safety officer, paramedic Stuart Funk. Funk, who is also the agency's community outreach and education director, is the agency's point person on safety internally and with the county.

Members of the staff were encouraged to come up with ideas for safety initiatives, and take the lead on researching and developing solutions. "For each one of our initiatives, a crew member takes it on as a project, doing the research and sharing what they learned with our safety committee and management. Then we decide whether to go forward with it," said Butler County EMS Safety Officer Stuart Funk.

Paramedic Collin Engraf took on

improving the visibility of responders by adding reflective stripes and graphics to uniforms and emergency vehicles, and adopting light sequences that research has shown make ambulances more visible to motorists.

Another initiative, the peer support program, was led by paramedic Justin "JD" Smith. He studied the programs offered by fire and police departments, and felt EMS peer support fell short in comparison. He asked for volunteers "who had a calling, or felt they could do this or wanted to explore it," Funk recalled.

About half of the agency's eight peer supporters have undergone a 40-hour training in critical incident stress management. As well, a local psychologist works with the group, offering mental health first aid classes and serving as a referral source when employees need more help. The Butler County EMS peer support team has also offered debriefing services to dispatch agencies and others within the community.

"In the last year, we've done at least six debriefings in our region, including one in a community after a shooting at a restaurant," Williams said. "The mental health resources just aren't available in our rural and frontier areas."

Peer support was especially important in helping staff cope with the stress of the pandemic. The group delivered care boxes for people who were sick or quarantining. "They were constantly reaching out and checking on everyone," Williams said.

