Will an ambulance get to you in time?

Maybe not in Iowa, investigation finds

Daniel Lathrop and Philip Joens
Des Moines Register
USA TODAY NETWORK

First of two parts
GRINNELL — It was lunchtime on an otherwise sleepy Saturday afternoon in October 2020 for the residents of 20th Street, a quiet road on the outskirts of this central Iowa college town of 9,000.

In an instant, an explosion and fireball shattered the silence. A propane leak had ignited, sending sheets of flame through Darwin and Marlene Stepanek’s house. Both suffered severe burns. If they had any chance of surviv-
ing, they needed to get to a hospital as quickly as possible.

Response time for EMS calls in minutes

The average time it takes for an ambulance to arrive on scene after a 911 call has increased in Iowa’s 78 rural counties, rising to more than twice the National Fire Protection Association’s target response time for 90% of calls.

Maybe not in Iowa, investigation finds

When Darwin and Marlene Stepanek suffered what would prove to be fatal burns in a gas explosion at their home near Grinnell in 2020, the town’s sole ambulance was on another call. It took almost 20 minutes for one from another community to arrive, SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER/SMITH FUNERAL HOME & CREMATORY

COMING MONDAY
A 2021 Iowa tax law offers the possibility of tax funding for EMS. But advocates wonder: Will governments ante up tax support without being required to?

Mum’s the Word!

Goode Greenhouses has the largest selection of fall mums and in more colors that you can imagine. Goode Greenhouses can add that perfect splash of beautiful color to your home!

Satisfying every dining need
2022 edition of the 33 essential restaurants of Des Moines.

Weather
High 82° Low 63° Strong thunderstorms.

When it comes to EMS, investigation finds services a fragile patchwork, Iowa emergency medical services badly needed in communities through taxes — a change that advocates say is badly needed in communities across Iowa.

The delay in the Stepaneks’ case — while an especially dramatic example — is not unique, a Des Moines Register investigation of Iowa’s emergency medical services shows. And since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, response times have grown, the investigation found.

Many people regard EMS as an essential service, but the system in Iowa and across the U.S. struggles to remain financially viable and to fulfill its mission of quickly delivering care, local and national emergency officials say.

Continued from Page 1A

Go store. The notification didn’t go out to the 5-minute target the National Fire Protection Association sets for 90% of response times in Iowa and surrounding states rose to 10 minutes, seven seconds — more than double the time in which the National Fire Protection Association says 90% of calls should be answered.

Though the state has taken recent action that could pave the way for improved service, EMS providers say more forceful measures are needed. Whether a faster response would have saved them is unknown. But as a result, Grinnell is preparing to make a major change in its EMS system — declaring it an essential service and funding it in part through taxes — a change that advocates say is badly needed in communities across Iowa.

Many people regard EMS as an essential service, but the system in Iowa and across the U.S. struggles to remain financially viable and to fulfill its mission of quickly delivering care, local and national emergency officials say.

The Register found that:

 antes to seven minutes after the original call, which is not unique, a Des Moines Register investigation of Iowa’s emergency medical services shows. And since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, response times have grown, the investigation found.

Many people regard EMS as an essential service, but the system in Iowa and across the U.S. struggles to remain financially viable and to fulfill its mission of quickly delivering care, local and national emergency officials say.

Continued on next page

Matt Carter is a part-time paramedic for Dysart EMS. Before the pandemic, average response times in Iowa and surrounding states already exceeded what national standards recommend. Photo by Brittany Wierick/Dess Moines Register

For emergency calls since 2019 rose by four minutes, six seconds to 18 minutes, seven seconds -- compared to the 5-minute target the National Fire Protection Association sets for 90% of calls and eight- to nine-minute targets other groups recommend for 90% of calls. The 79 less populous counties, average response rose by 20 seconds, to 18 minutes, seven seconds -- compared to the 5-minute target the National Fire Protection Association sets for 90% of calls and eight- to nine-minute targets other groups recommend for 90% of calls.

Iowa emergency medical services are a fragile patchwork, investigation finds

The delay in the Stepaneks’ case — while an especially dramatic example — is not unique, a Des Moines Register investigation of Iowa’s emergency medical services shows. And since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, response times have grown, the investigation found.

Many people regard EMS as an essential service, but the system in Iowa and across the U.S. struggles to remain financially viable and to fulfill its mission of quickly delivering care, local and national emergency officials say.

Continued on next page

Matt Carter is a part-time paramedic for Dysart EMS. Before the pandemic, average response times in Iowa and surrounding states already exceeded what national standards recommend. Photo by Brittany Wierick/Dess Moines Register

For emergency calls since 2019 rose by four minutes, six seconds to 18 minutes, seven seconds -- compared to the 5-minute target the National Fire Protection Association sets for 90% of calls and eight- to nine-minute targets other groups recommend for 90% of calls. The 79 less populous counties, average response rose by 20 seconds, to 18 minutes, seven seconds -- compared to the 5-minute target the National Fire Protection Association sets for 90% of calls and eight- to nine-minute targets other groups recommend for 90% of calls.

Iowa emergency medical services are a fragile patchwork, investigation finds

The delay in the Stepaneks’ case — while an especially dramatic example — is not unique, a Des Moines Register investigation of Iowa’s emergency medical services shows. And since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, response times have grown, the investigation found.

Many people regard EMS as an essential service, but the system in Iowa and across the U.S. struggles to remain financially viable and to fulfill its mission of quickly delivering care, local and national emergency officials say.

Continued on next page

Matt Carter is a part-time paramedic for Dysart EMS. Before the pandemic, average response times in Iowa and surrounding states already exceeded what national standards recommend. Photo by Brittany Wierick/Dess Moines Register

For emergency calls since 2019 rose by four minutes, six seconds to 18 minutes, seven seconds -- compared to the 5-minute target the National Fire Protection Association sets for 90% of calls and eight- to nine-minute targets other groups recommend for 90% of calls. The 79 less populous counties, average response rose by 20 seconds, to 18 minutes, seven seconds -- compared to the 5-minute target the National Fire Protection Association sets for 90% of calls and eight- to nine-minute targets other groups recommend for 90% of calls.
Texas counties, and past president of the Upper Pine River Fire Protection District.

In Clive, a Des Moines suburb of about 35,000, Dave Edgar, West Des Moines EMS assistant chief, said they have a mechanism that would allow them to respond more quickly. "We have sometimes had to push that envelope," he said. "It's a line of duty death that we experienced.

"I can't thank each of these dedicated public servants enough for their persistence during one of the most difficult times in our state and nation," Reynolds said in a news release.

"That is one of the most difficult times we've ever experienced," he said. "Quickly this ambulance out the door. The clergy, the police, the fire department, all of us are doing our part to try to get to the scene."

In Clive, a Des Moines suburb of about 125,000, Dave Edgar, West Des Moines EMS assistant chief, said they have a mechanism that would allow them to respond more quickly. "We have sometimes had to push that envelope," he said. "It's a line of duty death that we experienced." said in a news release.

"I can't thank each of these dedicated public servants enough for their persistence during one of the most difficult times in our state and nation," Reynolds said in a news release.

"That is one of the most difficult times we've ever experienced," he said. "Quickly this ambulance out the door. The clergy, the police, the fire department, all of us are doing our part to try to get to the scene."

In Clive, a Des Moines suburb of about 125,000, Dave Edgar, West Des Moines EMS assistant chief, said they have a mechanism that would allow them to respond more quickly. "We have sometimes had to push that envelope," he said. "It's a line of duty death that we experienced." said in a news release.

"I can't thank each of these dedicated public servants enough for their persistence during one of the most difficult times in our state and nation," Reynolds said in a news release.

"That is one of the most difficult times we've ever experienced," he said. "Quickly this ambulance out the door. The clergy, the police, the fire department, all of us are doing our part to try to get to the scene."

In Clive, a Des Moines suburb of about 125,000, Dave Edgar, West Des Moines EMS assistant chief, said they have a mechanism that would allow them to respond more quickly. "We have sometimes had to push that envelope," he said. "It's a line of duty death that we experienced." said in a news release.

"I can't thank each of these dedicated public servants enough for their persistence during one of the most difficult times in our state and nation," Reynolds said in a news release.

"That is one of the most difficult times we've ever experienced," he said. "Quickly this ambulance out the door. The clergy, the police, the fire department, all of us are doing our part to try to get to the scene."

In Clive, a Des Moines suburb of about 125,000, Dave Edgar, West Des Moines EMS assistant chief, said they have a mechanism that would allow them to respond more quickly. "We have sometimes had to push that envelope," he said. "It's a line of duty death that we experienced." said in a news release.

"I can't thank each of these dedicated public servants enough for their persistence during one of the most difficult times in our state and nation," Reynolds said in a news release.

"That is one of the most difficult times we've ever experienced," he said. "Quickly this ambulance out the door. The clergy, the police, the fire department, all of us are doing our part to try to get to the scene."

In Clive, a Des Moines suburb of about 125,000, Dave Edgar, West Des Moines EMS assistant chief, said they have a mechanism that would allow them to respond more quickly. "We have sometimes had to push that envelope," he said. "It's a line of duty death that we experienced." said in a news release.

"I can't thank each of these dedicated public servants enough for their persistence during one of the most difficult times in our state and nation," Reynolds said in a news release.

"That is one of the most difficult times we've ever experienced," he said. "Quickly this ambulance out the door. The clergy, the police, the fire department, all of us are doing our part to try to get to the scene."

In Clive, a Des Moines suburb of about 125,000, Dave Edgar, West Des Moines EMS assistant chief, said they have a mechanism that would allow them to respond more quickly. "We have sometimes had to push that envelope," he said. "It's a line of duty death that we experienced." said in a news release.

"I can't thank each of these dedicated public servants enough for their persistence during one of the most difficult times in our state and nation," Reynolds said in a news release.

"That is one of the most difficult times we've ever experienced," he said. "Quickly this ambulance out the door. The clergy, the police, the fire department, all of us are doing our part to try to get to the scene."

In Clive, a Des Moines suburb of about 125,000, Dave Edgar, West Des Moines EMS assistant chief, said they have a mechanism that would allow them to respond more quickly. "We have sometimes had to push that envelope," he said. "It's a line of duty death that we experienced." said in a news release.

"I can't thank each of these dedicated public servants enough for their persistence during one of the most difficult times in our state and nation," Reynolds said in a news release.

"That is one of the most difficult times we've ever experienced," he said. "Quickly this ambulance out the door. The clergy, the police, the fire department, all of us are doing our part to try to get to the scene."

In Clive, a Des Moines suburb of about 125,000, Dave Edgar, West Des Moines EMS assistant chief, said they have a mechanism that would allow them to respond more quickly. "We have sometimes had to push that envelope," he said. "It's a line of duty death that we experienced." said in a news release.

"I can't thank each of these dedicated public servants enough for their persistence during one of the most difficult times in our state and nation," Reynolds said in a news release.

"That is one of the most difficult times we've ever experienced," he said. "Quickly this ambulance out the door. The clergy, the police, the fire department, all of us are doing our part to try to get to the scene."

In Clive, a Des Moines suburb of about 125,000, Dave Edgar, West Des Moines EMS assistant chief, said they have a mechanism that would allow them to respond more quickly. "We have sometimes had to push that envelope," he said. "It's a line of duty death that we experienced." said in a news release.

"I can't thank each of these dedicated public servants enough for their persistence during one of the most difficult times in our state and nation," Reynolds said in a news release.

"That is one of the most difficult times we've ever experienced," he said. "Quickly this ambulance out the door. The clergy, the police, the fire department, all of us are doing our part to try to get to the scene."

In Clive, a Des Moines suburb of about 125,000, Dave Edgar, West Des Moines EMS assistant chief, said they have a mechanism that would allow them to respond more quickly. "We have sometimes had to push that envelope," he said. "It's a line of duty death that we experienced." said in a news release.

"I can't thank each of these dedicated public servants enough for their persistence during one of the most difficult times in our state and nation," Reynolds said in a news release.

"That is one of the most difficult times we've ever experienced," he said. "Quickly this ambulance out the door. The clergy, the police, the fire department, all of us are doing our part to try to get to the scene."

In Clive, a Des Moines suburb of about 125,000, Dave Edgar, West Des Moines EMS assistant chief, said they have a mechanism that would allow them to respond more quickly. "We have sometimes had to push that envelope," he said. "It's a line of duty death that we experienced." said in a news release.

"I can't thank each of these dedicated public servants enough for their persistence during one of the most difficult times in our state and nation," Reynolds said in a news release.

"That is one of the most difficult times we've ever experienced," he said. "Quickly this ambulance out the door. The clergy, the police, the fire department, all of us are doing our part to try to get to the scene."

In Clive, a Des Moines suburb of about 125,000, Dave Edgar, West Des Moines EMS assistant chief, said they have a mechanism that would allow them to respond more quickly. "We have sometimes had to push that envelope," he said. "It's a line of duty death that we experienced." said in a news release.

"I can't thank each of these dedicated public servants enough for their persistence during one of the most difficult times in our state and nation," Reynolds said in a news release.

"That is one of the most difficult times we've ever experienced," he said. "Quickly this ambulance out the door. The clergy, the police, the fire department, all of us are doing our part to try to get to the scene."

In Clive, a Des Moines suburb of about 125,000, Dave Edgar, West Des Moines EMS assistant chief, said they have a mechanism that would allow them to respond more quickly. "We have sometimes had to push that envelope," he said. "It's a line of duty death that we experienced." said in a news release.

"I can't thank each of these dedicated public servants enough for their persistence during one of the most difficult times in our state and nation," Reynolds said in a news release.

"That is one of the most difficult times we've ever experienced," he said. "Quickly this ambulance out the door. The clergy, the police, the fire department, all of us are doing our part to try to get to the scene."

In Clive, a Des Moines suburb of about 125,000, Dave Edgar, West Des Moines EMS assistant chief, said they have a mechanism that would allow them to respond more quickly. "We have sometimes had to push that envelope," he said. "It's a line of duty death that we experienced." said in a news release.

"I can't thank each of these dedicated public servants enough for their persistence during one of the most difficult times in our state and nation," Reynolds said in a news release.

"That is one of the most difficult times we've ever experienced," he said. "Quickly this ambulance out the door. The clergy, the police, the fire department, all of us are doing our part to try to get to the scene."

In Clive, a Des Moines suburb of about 125,000, Dave Edgar, West Des Moines EMS assistant chief, said they have a mechanism that would allow them to respond more quickly. "We have sometimes had to push that envelope," he said. "It's a line of duty death that we experienced." said in a news release.

"I can't thank each of these dedicated public servants enough for their persistence during one of the most difficult times in our state and nation," Reynolds said in a news release.

"That is one of the most difficult times we've ever experienced," he said. "Quickly this ambulance out the door. The clergy, the police, the fire department, all of us are doing our part to try to get to the scene."

In Clive, a Des Moines suburb of about 125,000, Dave Edgar, West Des Moines EMS assistant chief, said they have a mechanism that would allow them to respond more quickly. "We have sometimes had to push that envelope," he said. "It's a line of duty death that we experienced." said in a news release.

"I can't thank each of these dedicated public servants enough for their persistence during one of the most difficult times in our state and nation," Reynolds said in a news release.

"That is one of the most difficult times we've ever experienced," he said. "Quickly this ambulance out the door. The clergy, the police, the fire department, all of us are doing our part to try to get to the scene."