

Testimony of Betsy Fitzgerald, Manager, Washington County

Re: LD 526, An Act to provide Funding to Emergency Medical Service Organizations

Senator Beebe-Center, Representative Salisbury and members of the Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee. My name is Betsy Fitzgerald and I serve as the Manager in Washington County, one of the most rural counties in the State of Maine.

Washington County is 3,258 square miles populated by approximately 32,000 people or roughly 13 people per square mile, making it the third least populous county in Maine. The "Sunrise County" is the easternmost county in the entire United States housing 47 municipalities and plantations as well as two tribal communities, Indian Township and Sipayik. Approximately half the county is located in the Unorganized Territories.

The County was served by 10 ambulance services of different configurations; two have since become inactive because of funding. Some are municipally owned, some are independent organizations, and most are staffed by volunteers. Several are out-of-service one or more days a week because they cannot find staff. This is not a sustainable system. When the Regional Communication Center, run by Washington County government, puts out a call for an ambulance, the dispatchers are not confident a service can respond in a timely manner.

This is the conundrum in which we find ourselves. When someone calls 911 they are already in a bit of a panic. Something is wrong, often someone is hurt, blood is scary. The expectation that help is on the way is a powerful one. The wait time is awful. Residents of Washington County live with the understanding that an ambulance is probably not going to appear within 60 seconds but waiting for much longer periods of time is hard to imagine. We all have horror stories of ambulances that didn't get to an accident scene or someone who succumbed to a heart attack before help could arrive. Most of central, northern and eastern Maine does not have metropolitan areas where staff live at an ambulance base and are ready at a moment's notice.

This year the ambulance services have begun to request needed funding from the towns they cover. Some towns have responded positively to what has amounted to increases as much as 300% (Town of Machias). That is a huge jump. The costs of ambulance service are another demand on the property tax.

I know, it's all about the money. Everything has a cost. Fuel, tires, training, supplies, employees...they all have a cost. In spite of these costs, many still spend hours just in case a call goes out and they are needed.

The Washington County Commissioners have heard from the ambulance services collectively and I am sure, separately. They support all the services. On behalf of the Commissioners and the residents of Washington County I urge your support of LD 526. This funding opportunity to impact the lives of all state residents in such a positive manner should not be missed; it is the chance to do good work.

Thank you and I am available to answer any questions.