



United New York Ambulance Network (UNYAN)

Testimony submitted to the New York State Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Health

Executive Budget Proposal

February 8, 2022

Overview:

- HMH Article VII Part D – Healthcare Worker Bonuses - Support
- Increase EMS Training fund by \$6M – Aid to Localities - Emergency Medical Services Account (20809)
- HMH Article VII Part F – Modernize EMS - Support with modifications - Move off budget
- Create NYS Ambulance Provider Assessment Program

Introduction:

As Chairman of the United New York Ambulance Network (UNYAN) and General Manager Guilfoyle Ambulance Service Inc., I am honored to present the following testimony to you. UNYAN is a professional trade association representing more than 40 commercial and not for profit ambulance providers across New York State, from Long Island to Watertown, from Albany to Buffalo, and everywhere in between. Our mission is to promote the delivery of high-quality and timely emergency medical care in a cost-effective manner whenever and wherever our members are called upon to provide Emergency Medical Services (EMS). The association views pre-hospital care as a critical component of the entire medical care system and values the integral services that allows communities to receive access to quality, affordable, and advanced aid when it matters the most.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, UNYAN members have played a vital role in public health and safety services at a time when assistance was in dire need. In New York, commercial ambulance services answer 47% of all emergency calls and 78% of all non-emergency calls, according to New York State Department of Health's own data. In times of crisis, our members have been on the front lines helping local communities through the ebbs and flows of this pandemic. Day in and day out, EMS responders have reported to work and continue to assist the ill and injured, while taking necessary precautions to keep

themselves healthy enough to serve. The commitment to the greater well-being of our state has been unrelenting and steadfast, yet our industry continues to grapple with the challenges of an underfunded environment, severe staffing shortages, and proposed legislation that creates more barriers than solutions.

For nearly two years, UNYAN members and EMS providers alike have had to withstand the financial burdens of skyrocketing costs for critical safety equipment while managing an ever-shrinking staff exposed to the dangers of the COVID-19 virus. When EMS personnel have fallen sick, our members have supported them in their recovery with paid time off and even bringing in replacement first responders, further adding to the increased costs of operations. Necessary measures have been taken in order to keep our agencies afloat, but as this pandemic continues with no true end in sight, our industry is left to accomplish the most with the very least.

Our elected officials across the state praised the efforts of EMS personnel as valiant and unrelenting when it came time to assist local governments with COVID-19 testing, contact tracing, and vaccine efforts. But, the support that our industry needs were not adequate in times of despair. As we forge ahead in 2022, what remains evident is our perilous financial circumstances and desperate need to replenish our workforce to maximum capacity. The times ahead are uncertain, but our state needs to be prepared and armed with well-trained ambulance providers, a pivotal extension of this state's health care system and monumental effort to restore normalcy.

Support EMS Training Efforts and Workforce Retainment by Doubling Budget Allocation

UNYAN is grateful to the Governor and Legislature for proposing new budgetary reinforcements that will support the essential revival of the state's healthcare industry. The \$10 billion investment that was proposed would be the most expansive health care package in New York State's History and would bring with it an era of a modernized and resilient system. Moving forward, commercial ambulance providers hope the state will take the necessary steps to include our industry as a necessary pillar in rebuilding our entire healthcare workforce. We are on the very front lines.

Since 1999, the \$6M budget allocation for EMS training programs has remained fixed and uncompromising as the industry struggles to retain and attract emergency medical technicians (EMTs) and paramedics. The ever-changing nature of staffing needs is dependent on the resources made available to encourage modernized training sessions that appeal to a greater audience. Our workforce is comprised of hardworking individuals who rely on flexibility and efficiency to complete their certifications in a timely manner. The budgeted amount for the maintenance and operations of EMS training in New York has remained the same for the past 23 year. This funding in no way reflects the current state of our industry and the supplemental assistance that is required to advance our workforce.

The EMS industry therefore asks that the Legislature double the budget for training programs to \$12M to ensure that our system is prepared to manage current and potential public health concerns. The pandemic has been a consistent reminder that we may not always be prepared for all crises, but how we manage those hardships is essential to the success of the future. The emergency medical services industry has always played a critical role in New York's healthcare system; however, it is imperative that the education pipeline supporting EMS provider training be enhanced to reflect the present and future missions we are sure to service.

Removal of Article VII Health and Mental Hygiene Article Part F

Currently at your desks for consideration is the Health and Mental Hygiene Article VII Bill, that aims to reform the current systems and procedures of health care and human service industries across the state. Specifically Part F seeks to modernize EMS. It should be noted that while UNYAN agrees that some portions of Public Health Law Article 30, are due for modernization, we had no input into the proposed language of Part F. We have many questions as to the intent of some of these proposals and have a difficult time truly understanding what is being proposed as many details are left to regulations by DOH.

It is also worth noting that the State EMS Council (SEMSCO) is a cross section of EMS industry experts who also had no formal hand in development of these proposals. Many of the proposals of Part F seek to remove the input and consideration of SEMSCO and leave decision making power with DOH and the Commissioner. It is UNYAN's opinion that the proposals of Part F should be more fully thought out with EMS industry experts outside of the condensed timeframe of the budget.

UNYAN advocates for the SEMSCO to be empowered and properly staffed to make decisions for the good of the EMS industry. The concepts put forth in Part F of sustainability assurance programs, comprehensive statewide EMS plans and the EMS systems training program are laudable but the details of these should be more fully vetted outside of the context of the budget.

UNYAN supports the definition of EMS changes proposed in Part F. EMS is the gateway to the healthcare system, we are no longer just transportation and the proposed definition embraces and recognizes that. During the early portion of the COVID-19 pandemic, EMS was called on to perform their duties outside of the traditional roles of just pre-hospital care. We provided treatment-in-place, when hospitals were not accepting non-critical patients or patients were too scared to go to the hospital. We vaccinated patients in their homes when they could not travel to vaccination clinics. The expanded definition of EMS proposed recognizes the vital role of EMS and their ability to serve patients, where and when they need care.

One of the largest concerns as it pertains to Part F of the bill are the extensive changes that would inevitably disrupt the "Certificate of Need" process which is reliant on the involvement of SEMSCO and the Regional EMS Councils (REMSCO) throughout the state.

The intention to develop a completely new hierarchy of checks and balances has no fiscal impact whatsoever, and therefore should not be included in the budget.

Local EMS providers and the SEMSCO are in the best position to know if there is a true need for another service to better streamline processes. Saturating a system with arbitrary operations becomes increasingly detrimental to patient care that is reliant on the knowledge of those in the actual industry. Part F's course of action does not consider the local input put in place to insure a representative scope of needs regarding emergency medical services. Adding a new approach without refining the existing system will strain the current workforce even further and dismiss local connectivity. We welcome improvement of the systems at hand, but first would like to invite conversations with our government and EMS industry leaders in order to achieve the appropriate measures taken for future courses of action.

Consideration of NYS Ambulance Assessment Program

As I mentioned, Emergency Medical Services are essential to ensuring New York residents have access to quality care across the state and have been particularly critical during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, providers have long been struggling with low reimbursement rates. Medicaid reimbursement typically covers only 65% of their cost per transport. While the New York Department of Health increased Medicaid rates for EMS services in 2018, Medicaid rates remain as low as 30-40% of Medicare rates for comparable services.

Both upstate and downstate providers have felt initially stressed by the decrease in transports, non-reimbursable additional costs incurred to treat COVID-19 patients in the community, and the need to keep their EMTs safe throughout the pandemic. Low base rates and the COVID-19 changes in service volume have made a lasting impact on providers' financial stability.

To ensure ongoing support for this life-saving industry, UNYAN is proposing a provider assessment to generate additional federal Medicaid funding for all non-governmental EMS providers at no cost to the state. A dozen states have passed legislation to create similar EMS assessment programs which are instrumental in contributing to financial stability for providers. DOH will use these provider-supplied dollars to significantly increase federal funding coming into New York and use these new funds to support Medicaid rates for the EMS providers.

This program has the potential to generate tens of millions of dollars annually in increased federal reimbursement for ambulance providers and will be budget neutral for the state. Increased reimbursement can be used to improve EMS service capacity, improve equipment, increase wages and provide training for EMTs, all at no additional costs to the patients. EMS providers are willing to front the cost of the provider assessment for the good of the industry, the patients we serve and our employees.

We are asking our legislators to include language in the budget to create this ambulance assessment program.

Conclusion

As we look to 2022, and an eventual end to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to remember that UNYAN members represent an overwhelmingly cost-effective option for municipalities in New York and ensure that high-quality emergency medical care is provided for our residents. However, our workforce is in desperate need of financial support and improvement in order to continue the fight.

UNYAN members will continue to serve the communities in which they operate to the best of their abilities, despite the many constraints they face. The future of our agencies remains at risk, and we are calling on the Governor and the Legislature to support and secure our budget and legislative priorities during 2022. As frontline essential workers who have put their lives at risk to save others, it is imperative that our members receive the critical resources needed to continue doing their jobs safely and effectively.

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