

DRAFT KEY FINDINGS AND MUTUAL INTERESTS

19 April 2016

CONTEXT FOR THIS PROCESS

At the request of the Skagit County Commissioners, consultant Jim Reid of The Falconer Group[conducted seventeen interviews of nineteen people between 22 December 2015 and 8 March 2016. Most interviews lasted between thirty and sixty minutes, and most, but not all, were conducted by telephone.

The purposes of the interviews were to: 1) ask people with knowledge, expertise, and involvement in the Emergency Medical Services (EMS) system in Skagit County for their assessment of its strengths and weaknesses; 2) identify their interests in the system and in a process to reexamine it; and 3) solicit initial or preliminary ideas for strengthening it.

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVIEWS

These key findings reflect the overarching themes from the interviews.

1. Everyone is proud of the quality of services currently delivered. For a county whose residents live in communities more suburban, rural, or isolated by mountains and forests than in urban centers, and for a system in which there are multiple providers, the quality of service is considered exceptional. "The citizens are well served. The public doesn't see any gaps. On the front lines, we work well together."
2. The employees and volunteers who provide services were universally praised for their dedication, passion, skills, and high quality work. They are considered the system's greatest resources and assets.
3. Many people expressed pride that Skagit County is one of only a small number of counties in the State of Washington that has a countywide levy to raise and distribute funding for EMS. Interviewees consider the countywide levy an indicator of a sophisticated system; the voters' approval of the levy is seen as a reflection of high caliber services.
4. The multi-year contracts between Skagit County and service providers that were recently agreed to are seen as positive signs of cooperation and as providing stability, certainty, and consistency for the system.
5. A frequent interest expressed during the interviews was that the EMS system must be as efficient and accountable as possible before the EMS levy comes up for renewal by Skagit County voters in November 2018.

6. Many people stated the EMS in Skagit County is “surprisingly highly politicized and needlessly personalized.” “The politics are more broken than the system.” Reasons given for this condition were: a) historic mistrust between the County and cities and among the cities; b) long-standing rivalries between communities, including between urban and rural areas; c) the belief that the local Fire District (or firehouse), like the local high school, helps define identify of communities, particularly in rural areas; and d) long-held assumptions that may be more myth than reality.
7. Two assumptions that may be most polarizing in discussions about the future of EMS are: a) The cities are seeking more EMS funding to finance their fire departments. Their EMS operations are “over-financed and underperforming.” 2) Cities won’t and don’t provide services outside their boundaries. These perceptions, which are strongly refuted by city officials, need to be addressed.
8. Based on all the interviews, three options appear to be considered viable to explore: a) the status quo; b) a fire-based system; and c) a County managed system. Among those who appear to lean toward the third option, there is concern that the County may be reluctant to assume this risk. One reason for the different positions appears to be an emphasis on quality of service versus an emphasis on efficiency and/or accountability.
9. Many people believe that if the system needs to change, changes would be more easily implemented if a guarantee were given that no current positions will be eliminated because of the changes. One comment seemed to summarize the sentiment of many: “We should be willing to pay a little bit more for a smart transition.”
10. Some people believe that a weakness of the EMS system is the absence of criteria for basing the decision about the level of support that should be dispatched to serve patients. There is a perception that this lack of criteria can result in a higher level of service being provided than is necessary. Some people recommended that the system borrow or learn from the criteria used by King County’s EMS program to dispatch services.

MUTUAL INTERESTS OF THE PARTIES

These are the mutual interests that Jim believes he heard from the interviewees:

1. Deliver high quality services.
2. Provide the right level of services at the right time to the right place.
3. Ensure the system is sustainable, efficient, and accountable.
4. Ensure that response times to service calls are appropriate given the location.
5. Provide stability and certainty to employees, patients, and the public.
6. Make service delivery and decision-making as simple as possible.
7. Make decisions based on facts, information, and best practices.
8. In discussing the future of the system, have thoughtful, respectful, and civil deliberations.
9. Any changes to the system should be made in an orderly manner over time.
10. Preserve the volunteer and community-based elements of the system