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## Pinellas fire chiefs say plan will reduce EMS services



Anne Lindberg, Times Staff Writer

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Local fire chiefs say services will be decreased if Pinellas County follows through with a proposal to cut funding for emergency medical treatment. Among the cuts is a plan to trim the number of paramedics for which the county pays.

"One thing is for sure, while county staff's . . . proposal may change the EMS system in a way that complies with an arbitrary standard, you will no longer have the system that we, the citizens of Pinellas County, have come to expect," wrote Pinellas Suncoast fire Chief Robert Polk, head of the Pinellas County Fire Chiefs Association, in a letter sent Friday to county commissioners.

But it's unclear if the letter will have much effect — commissioners gave the go-ahead to the proposal earlier this month.

"I appreciate their opinions," County Administrator Bob LaSala said Tuesday. "The board's given us direction and we'll go from there."

Under the current system, the county uses money from a countywide property tax to pay the 18 fire departments to be first on the scene of medical emergencies. The departments are required to have their firefighter-paramedics on the scene within 7 ½ minutes 90 percent of the time. But the countywide average is closer to 4 ½ minutes.

Under the proposal, the county would cut the EMS budgets of the five departments that answer the most EMS calls — St. Petersburg, Clearwater, Largo, Pinellas Park and Lealman. The county would then freeze the EMS budgets of all 18 departments for three years. After that, it would put a cap on the increases that the departments could be given.

The plan would also change the number of paramedics who are paid using county money. Using a complicated formula, the county would pay fewer paramedics at night when, Pinellas officials say, there is less need for emergency medical services.



*Bob LaSala expects no negative impact.*

But a majority of the members of the chiefs association sees at least eight problems with the proposal. The first is that the plan is based on data from 2010 rather than using the most recent figures from 2013 on the number of EMS calls, who is answering them and how long it's taking to handle them.

The chiefs are also concerned that the proposal will not actually cut costs but merely shift them from the county, which is required by state law to pay for EMS, to the cities and fire districts. The cost shift will happen, in part, they say, because of the freeze. If gas prices go up, for example, and the county refuses to pay the actual costs, then the cities and districts must fund those increases to keep the vehicles running.

Although county officials have said the proposal has no negative impact on 10 of the departments, the chiefs say that's not so.

"It is counterintuitive to think that static revenue and increasing costs result in no impact," Polk wrote. "Absent the ability to control inflation and call volume, (departments) will be forced to make up the gap caused by the freeze."

The effect of the plan to cut the number of paramedics paid during the so-called nonpeak hours — those times when there are historically fewer calls for EMS — results in fewer units. That will have a ripple effect across the county, the chiefs say, as nearby fire and EMS vehicles are called in to cover for the missing units. The plan will also mean a reduction in available personnel to provide help for those who call for help.

"No one has suggested that performance will improve," Polk wrote. "Neither have they said it will remain the same."

Instead, the county has conceded the average response time will increase, but remain within the 7 ½-minute requirement.

"An increase of one minute or three minutes still meets the county's arbitrary standard but nevertheless constitutes a service reduction," Polk wrote. "The people paying the bills care about real response time, not an arbitrary standard."

*Anne Lindberg can be reached at [alindberg@tampabay.com](mailto:alindberg@tampabay.com) or (727) 893-8450. Follow @alindbergtimes on Twitter.*

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