



Smiths Station Fire & Rescue Smiths Station, Alabama

Felton Adkinson
Chairman

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Effective 5 February 2022 Smiths Station Fire & Rescue "SSFR" will suspend ambulance transport operations indefinitely.

This reduction in services is the direct result of a severe staffing and funding shortage that has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

"We are extremely disappointed that it has become necessary to suspend our emergency transport capabilities, we started our ambulance service to fill a need and save lives and we have saved many lives. However, unfortunately without additional funding and staff we are unable to continue operations at this time. It is our sincere hope to restart as soon as possible" said Joe Walden, SSFR Fire Chief

"Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, there was a nationwide shortage of Paramedic's and EMT's. As with every industry the staffing problems have only gotten worse since the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result, we have struggled to find enough personnel to staff our ambulance on a 24/7 basis for a number of months" remarked Daniel Sexton, SSFR Deputy Chief. "Another major issue for us has been funding. In addition to skyrocketing inflation affecting fuel, maintenance, and the medical supplies that are needed and required to operate an ambulance, we have been unable to offer basic employment benefits to our Paramedic's and EMT's such insurance, retirement, and competitive salaries. This lack of basic benefits and below average salaries along with the fact that private ambulance agencies neighboring counties are offering as much as 10,000\$ signing bonuses has made it tough retain and/or attract new employees from the finite number of

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EMT's and Paramedics that are available in our area." He continued.

While the federal government has sent billions of dollars in Covid-19 relief funds to Hospitals, Cities, Counties and States very little of this money has filtered down to Fire & EMS. SSFR Board Chairman Felton Atkinson said, "It's very frustrating to watch the news or read the newspaper and see how literally millions of dollars are being allocated by the government to all kinds of projects that do are not directly covid related, while front line first responders -the ones answering 911 calls- are struggling to survive financially".

SSFR is working closely with ETS (the other ambulance service in Lee County) to minimize the impact this reduction in ambulance transport service will cause. SSFR will also continue to hold a ALS non-transport license in order to offer as much lifesaving services to citizens as possible.

Make no mistake this reduction in emergency ambulance transport service is a devastating blow to our community and all involved. We have witnessed first-hand how the quick response from our ambulance has not only improved the outcome of patients with a medical emergency, but we have seen lives saved by our ambulance. Everyone at SSFR wants to help people, we want to save lives and protect property, but we must have resources to do so.

Smiths Station Fire & Rescue hopes to develop and submit a plan to the Lee County Commission very soon that will help achieve the additional funding that is needed. We encourage concerned citizens to contact their elected officials and ask them to support our community and to help bring back ambulance transport service, expand our fire protection and rescue services.

About

Smiths Station Fire & Rescue was founded by concerned citizens in 1966. SSFR covers approximately 72 square miles, 35,000 citizens and answers over 2,000 emergency calls each year both inside and outside the city limits of Smiths Station. As the greater Smiths Station area continues to grow at a rapid pace, we expect to continue to see rapid growth in calls for emergency assistance.

Contact

For questions or more information about this press release or any topic related to SSFR:

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Citizens wishing to voice support for SSFR and emergency ambulance transport in the Smiths Station area can contact their elected officials.

Faq's

Q) Does this mean we no longer have ambulance service in Smiths Station?

A) No, this means we only have a single ambulance in Smiths Station. We are working very closely with the other ambulance provider in Lee County (ETS, owned by EAMC) to minimize the impact as much as possible.

Q) Why is SSFR suspending ambulance operations?

A) We have struggled to hire and retain enough staff to operate our ambulances for several months. Our pay rates and lack of benefits are not competitive in the area so candidates chose to work elsewhere.

Q) Why didn't SSFR just pay the ambulance employees more?

A) Our funding has been the same since 2012. It does not increase, even though the price of everything has increased. Without additional funding we cannot attract or retain enough personnel to keep the ambulance staffed.

Q) Did SSFR offer ambulance employees other benefits such as health insurance and/or state retirement plans?

A) No. Our funding has been the same since 2012. It does not increase, even though the price of everything has increased. Our funding is not sufficient to offer those benefits, which made it even more difficult to attract and retain employees.

Q) How many ambulance employees did you have?

A) We had 6 full time slots available. At the time of operational suspension only 4 of those slots were filled.

Q) How will this affect me?

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Q) How is SSFR funded?

A) Prior to 1984 SSFR was funded solely by donations. From 1984 to 2012 SSFR was funded by a Fire Fee of 25\$ per house. In 2012 the voters of Lee County voted to increase the Fire Fee to 50\$ per house through 2036. Unfortunately, this amount is a fixed amount and does not change.

Q) The price of everything has gone up since 2012, how come the Fire Fee hasn't?

A) Unfortunately, the Fire Fee amount is a fixed amount and does not change. So while the price of everything goes up almost daily, the revenue from the Fire Fee never changes.

Q) Other than payroll hat costs are involved with operating an ambulance?

A) Insurance: Liability, Malpractice, Workers Comp, vehicle. Medical Supplies: Oxygen, Drugs, IV equipment, tape, etc
Equipment: Ambulance, Stretchers, Laptops, Linens, etc. Misc: Vehicle Maintenance: Oil Changes, Tires, Filters, Belts, etc.

Q) Aren't patients get charged when the Ambulance transports them?

A) Yes, while every patient that is transported received a bill, the non-pay rate is over 50%. The payments that are received are typically from insurance companies and each company pays an amount set by their contract. For example, Medicaid pays as little as 80\$ for a transport.

Q) Isn't the money received from insurance companies, Medicaid, and Medicare enough to keep the ambulance operating?

A) No. The payments from insurance companies, Medicaid, and Medicare are not enough to offset the non-payments. For example, Medicaid pays as little as 80\$ for a transport.

Q) Was SSFR's goal for the ambulance to be "profitable"?

A) No, our goal was never to run the ambulance at a "profit" our goal was always to save lives and improve patient outcomes by providing highly skilled, lifesaving assistance to members of our community. We don't believe that providing lifesaving assistance should be a for "profit" business.

Q) Didn't the Federal Government distribute billions in PPP and CARES Act funds?

A) This is a complicated question, that has a few answers:

1) As a 501(c)4 organized for public benefit SSFR was NOT eligible for PPP

2) While billions of federal dollars were sent to each of the 50 States, and millions filtered down to the Cities and Counties inside those states, virtually none of it was allocated for Fire or EMS Operations

3)The Federal Government also sent Hospitals and Nursing Homes millions in federal aid but again, none of that money was allocated for Fire or EMS

4) SSFR was fortunate enough to receive 2 ALS Cardiac Monitors and Autopulse CPR machines purchased by the Lee County Commission using federal Covid-19 dollars. We will continue using the equipment at the fire department.

Q) What is SSFR doing to solve this problem?

A) We are actively working to develop a plan to increase our funding and get back to full operations as soon as possible.

Q) Where can I learn more?

A) As soon as these plans are finalized, we will post them to social media, our website, and present them to the Lee County Commission and to the Smiths Station City Council.

In addition, we will hold public meetings at to explain our plan and answer any questions.

Q) What can I do to help?

A) At this time the best thing you can do is contact your elected officials and let them know this issue is important to you. Let them know you want a well-funded Fire & EMS department in our community. As our plan evolves we will clearly communicate how you can help.