

CITY OF SALEM

Written Testimony #1

City Council

555 Liberty St SE
Salem, OR 97301

Monday, September 26, 2022 6:00 PM

Virtual Meeting

3.3a. [22-382](#) Acceptance of a Small Community Air Service Development Grant Award

Ward(s): 2

Councilor(s): Nishioka

Neighborhood(s): SEMCA

Result Area(s): Strong and Diverse Economy

Recommendation: Authorize the City Manager to accept the SCASD grant award (Attachment 1).

Attachments: [SCASD Grant Award](#)

[Public Comment received by 1:00 p.m., September 26, 2022](#)

Add - Written Testimony.

5. a. [22-448](#) Motion from Councilor Vanessa Nordyke concerning a Request for Proposals for a Mobile Crisis Unit.

Ward(s): All Wards

Councilor(s): All Councilors

Neighborhood(s): All Neighborhoods

Attachments: [Public Comments received by 1:00 p.m., September 2](#)

Add - Written Testimony.

6.d. [22-435](#) Why the Fire Department Responds to Medical Emergencies with Multiple Apparatus.

Ward(s): All Wards

Councilor(s): All Councilors

Neighborhood(s): All Neighborhoods

Result Area(s): Safe Community

Recommendation: Information only

Attachments: [Public Comment received by 1:00 p.m., September 2](#)

Add - Written Testimony.

From: [Phil Carver](#)
To: [CityRecorder](#); [SALEM Manager](#)
Cc: [Heather Dimke](#); [Laurie Dougherty](#)
Subject: City Council 9/26/2022 Agenda Item 3.3a 22-382 public comment
Date: Sunday, September 25, 2022 10:30:04 PM

Public Comment on Agenda Item 3.3a 22-382

On accepting federal grant money for commercial air service

Philip H. Carver, Ph.D.

On behalf of 350 Salem OR

Sept 25, 2022

To City Manager, Mayor and City Council

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

The background on this agenda item states:

The \$850,000 award will be used primarily as a revenue guarantee to support air carriers in the early stages of their service to help ensure their long-term sustainability. Some of the funds will also be used to provide marketing support for the new service. Target markets identified in the grant application are Las Vegas, San Francisco, Phoenix, and Los Angeles. The airport's in-kind contributions will be the two-year waiver of landing fees and terminal space rent previously approved by City Council.

350 Salem is concerned about the advanced stage of this process without an analysis of the risk that city general fund money will have to be used to backfill costs if airlines leave after the two-year waiver period. Also, there has also not been an analysis of the effects of commercial air service on Salem's ability to meet its greenhouse gas (GHG) emission goals. Both analyses need to begin immediately and be completed before any City funds are spent on airport improvements needed for commercial service.

Previous discussions indicated that millions of dollars in capital improvements would be needed for commercial air service, with most funds associated with airport security. Some increased operational costs, especially around fire fighting, are also likely. It is unclear how the City will pay these costs and what likelihood there is that the City's general funds will get stuck with the tab if commercial service does not continue after the two-year waiver period. Such a study is absolutely necessary.

If such an event happened it would mean low and moderate income families would be paying for a service that would primarily serve upper income families. Having not conducted such a study violates the City's pledge to view policies through an equity

lens. Such an analysis cannot be conducted with an information vacuum.

Similarly, every major action that the City takes should be looked at through a climate lens. Based on 37 years as an energy and climate economist for the Oregon Dept. of Energy and the Oregon Public Utility, it is my professional judgment that substantial commercial air service would significantly increase GHG emissions from the airport, especially in the period approaching 2050. The Council has adopted a goal of being carbon neutral by 2050.

Approaching that date much of the vehicle fleet used to drive to the Portland airport will be electric with system emissions of nearly zero. In contrast, it is very unlikely the commercial air fleet will be able to use much zero emissions fuel. There are too many competing uses for the feedstock for bio-jet fuel and production of such fuel is likely to have significant emissions. Electric or renewable hydrogen aircraft do not appear to be practical for many decades, if at all.

I have not made an estimate of the range of possible emission increase and the cost of actions to offset such emissions. If the Council is serious about its emission goals, it will ask the staff to conduct such a study.

Thanks again for the opportunity to comment.

From: [Andrea Griffin](#)
To: [CityRecorder](#)
Subject: Support for Agenda 5.a
Date: Monday, September 26, 2022 3:54:37 AM

I support agenda item 5a for a mobile crisis unit. Salem PD is incapable of treating human beings like human beings and we need real resources now.

From: [Barbara Nabb](#)
To: [citycouncil](#); [CityRecorder](#)
Subject: Support for Agenda Item 5.a (Motion from Councilor Vanessa Nordyke concerning a Request for Proposals for a Mobile Crisis Unit)
Date: Monday, September 26, 2022 10:25:06 AM

Please vote YES on the motion from Councilor Vanessa Nordyke concerning a Request for Proposals for a Mobile Crisis Unit. Civilian-based mobile crisis units are being created in cities across the country to serve people in crisis. We need social workers, mental health and medical professionals to respond to people who are struggling. Mobile crisis units also free up other first responders, like police, fire, and ambulance, for higher acuity calls. Mobile crisis units complete the public safety spectrum.

Thank you,
Barbara Nabb

From: [Christine Chute](#)
To: [citycouncil](#)
Subject: Support for Agenda Item 5.a (Motion from Councilor Vanessa Nordyke concerning a Request for Proposals for a Mobile Crisis Unit).
Date: Sunday, September 25, 2022 10:36:22 AM

Dear Councilors,

I am writing to express my support for the Mobile Crisis Unit that has been discussed over the past several months and championed by Councilor Nordyke. Please vote YES on Councilor Nordyke's motion. People in crisis need responsive professionals trained to deal with their mental and physical health issues. Relieving Salem Police of some of their duties related to those in crisis might allow officers to deal with issues that require their special skills and training.

Thank you,

Christine

--

Christine Chute
Ward 2
Salem, OR

From: [Chong Kee Tan](#)
To: [CityRecorder](#); [citycouncil](#)
Subject: Support Agenda item 5.a (Motion from Councilor Vanessa Nurdyke for Mobile Crisis Unit)
Date: Sunday, September 25, 2022 5:31:34 PM

Dear Sirs and Mdms,

I am writing in support of this agenda item because I feel that a mobile crisis unit would be a good resource to have for Salem.

Thank you.

--

Chong Kee
Marion County

From: noreply@cityofsalem.net on behalf of carelynnp@gmail.com
To: [CityRecorder](#)
Subject: Submission
Date: Saturday, September 24, 2022 2:29:28 PM
Attachments: [ATT00001.bin](#)

Your Name	Carelynn Patterson
Your Email	carelynnp@gmail.com
Your Phone	5034090571
Street	1794 Summer St Se
City	Salem
State	OR
Zip	97302
Message	I support the mobile crisis unit. I work with homeless, and that is what many of them need. This has worked in Eugene! Please make this happen for our community.

This email was generated by the dynamic web forms contact us form on 9/24/2022.

From: [Dynee Medlock](#)
To: [citycouncil](#); [CityRecorder](#)
Subject: Support for Agenda Item 5.a (Motion from Councilor Vanessa Nurdyke concerning a Request for Proposals for a Mobile Crisis Unit)
Date: Monday, September 26, 2022 8:50:28 AM

Dear City Council,

Please vote YES on the motion from Councilor Vanessa Nurdyke concerning a Request for Proposals for a Mobile Crisis Unit. Civilian-based mobile crisis units are being created in cities across the country to serve people in crisis. We need social workers, mental health and medical professionals to respond to people who are struggling. Mobile crisis units also free up other first responders, like police, fire, and ambulance, for higher acuity calls. Mobile crisis units complete the public safety spectrum.

Sincerely,

Dynee Medlock
Resident of Ward 4

From: [Emi Emmers](#)
To: [citycouncil](#); [CityRecorder](#)
Subject: Support for Agenda 5.a
Date: Sunday, September 25, 2022 11:38:49 PM

Please Vote YES on the motion from Councilor Vanessa Nordyke concerning a Request for Proposal for a Mobile Crisis Unit. Civilian-based Mobile Crisis units are being created in cities across the country to serve people in Crisis. We need Social Workers, mental health and medical professionals to respond to people who are struggling. Mobile Crisis units also free up other first responders, like police, fire and ambulance, for higher acuity calls. Mobile Crisis units complete the public safety spectrum.

Thank you for your time
-Emily DeWitt

From: [Gretchen Coppedge](#)
To: [citycouncil](#); [CityRecorder](#)
Subject: Support for Agenda Item 5.a, Motion from Councilor Vanessa Nordyke Concerning a Request for Proposals for a Mobile Crisis Unit
Date: Sunday, September 25, 2022 12:50:54 PM

Civilian-based Mobile Crisis Units (MCU). are vital to the health of a city. Salem is very much in need of a MCU. After living in Eugene for years, where a strong MCU has been operating successfully, I was shocked to find Salem did not have such a unit when I moved here ten years ago. We see individuals in crisis on our streets at an increasingly frequent rate, and the police are overburdened or under prepared/trained to safely assist the individual in crisis, as well as other citizens and/or property owners who are impacted by the crisis situation. Sadly, police presence can exacerbate a crisis episode being experienced by a person, whereas a civilian crisis intervention team can reduce the crisis.

A trained civilian-based MCU frees up the emergency responders and police to handle the emergencies and criminal situations as they are best able to do.

--

Gretchen Coppedge
PO Box 4473
Salem, OR 97302

From: [Gennifer Goldstein](#)
To: [citycouncil](#); [CityRecorder](#)
Subject: SUPPORT for Agenda Item 5.a (Motion from the Councilor Vanessa Nordyke Concerning the Request for Proposals for a Mobile Crisis Unit)
Date: Sunday, September 25, 2022 10:46:37 PM

Dear City Council of Salem,

I am writing to ask you to please vote YES on Agenda Item 5.a – the Motion from Councilor Vanessa Nordyke Concerning the Request for Proposals for a Mobile Crisis Unit. Cities like Eugene are ahead in emergency/crisis management, because they have employed a crisis team to address mental health issues for which other first responders are just not equipped or trained. Rather than subtracting from traditional emergency services, lets add value by adding professionals that are appropriately trained and qualified to assess situations that require compassion and understanding, instead of force and submission.

If you have lived any amount of time on this planet, it is not difficult to conceive of circumstances that might cause an individual to become confused, disoriented, or heart-broken. In these circumstances, a first responder who has studied and trained in the mental health field would be much more likely to accurately assess behavior and see pain instead of anger, or fear instead of aggression. What is the advantage? Well, the strategy to address pain or fear may be much different than strategy to address anger or aggression. The end result is more likely to be de-escalation and helping, rather than arresting, an individual.

Mobile Crisis Units also create space for other first responders. It is unfair to expect our police to handle every situation under the sun – this is something we can take off their plate, or at least give them partners who can help them better address crises. We don't need to defund first responders – we need to add to the team. Mobile Crisis Units complete the public safety spectrum. Please VOTE YES on Agenda Item 5.a, and provide support for both the community and other first responders. Thank you!

Sincerely,

Gennifer Goldstein

[315-373-5141](tel:315-373-5141) | gmgoldstein@willamette.edu

From: [Grace Smith](#)
To: [citycouncil](#)
Subject: Agenda Item 5.a
Date: Sunday, September 25, 2022 10:13:15 AM

I wanted to voice my support of Vanessa Nordyke's attempt to get a mental health crisis unit initiated in Salem. We desperately need one. I volunteer at Helping Hands Resources, where we have seen a number of people experiencing mental health crises both in and around our shop. To date, we have been fortunate to be able to call 911 to assist us when we're over our heads. But we have had at least one circumstance when violence loomed immediately. It would have been wonderful to be able to call someone to defuse the situation. We do not have the skills necessary to do this on our own. I am asking you to vote for this.

Thank you.

Grace Smith

From: [Jim Scheppke](#)
To: [CityRecorder](#)
Cc: [citycouncil](#)
Subject: Support for Agenda Item 5.a (Motion from Councilor Vanessa Nordyke concerning a Request for Proposals for a Mobile Crisis Unit)
Date: Sunday, September 25, 2022 12:07:19 PM

Dear City Council:

We can't wait any longer for a civilian mobile response unit in Salem.

Please vote YES on Councilor Nordyke's motion to move forward with a Request for Proposals from a qualified provider of this service. Let's get this going in 2023. We need this MUCH MORE than we need more police.

Maybe you should reconsider your earlier action to add six officers to the SPD in 2023 and instead use these funds for civilian mobile crisis response in 2023. That would be the "evidence-based" thing to do. We know from the experience of CAHOOTS that a civilian mobile crisis response unit will significantly reduce calls for the SPD.

Daniel Garcia might not be on life support after being tased by Salem Police if, instead he had gotten help from mental health and drug addiction specialists. Haven't we seen enough of this in Salem?



Jim Scheppke, Ward 2
jscheppke@comcast.net
503-269-1559

From: [K.a.Hill](#)
To: [CityRecorder](#); [citycouncil](#)
Subject: support for agenda item 5.a, mobile crisis unit
Date: Monday, September 26, 2022 12:48:47 PM

i don't think i need to tell you all the reasons this is a good idea, plenty are telling you that. rather, i want to let you know that there is not one GOOD reason against, only fear-filled, control freakish reasons. please don't stand in the way of implementing this good idea.

Karen Hill
Highland Neighborhood, Salem

From: margosian2004@yahoo.com
To: [citycouncil](#); [CityRecorder](#)
Cc: [Deborah Patterson](#)
Subject: Support for Mobile Crisis Units (MCU"s)
Date: Sunday, September 25, 2022 3:32:58 PM

I, along with virtually all my friends, neighbors and associates, strongly support the establishment of MCUs.

As we walk or drive the streets of downtown Salem the profoundly troubled persons we encounter in, say, the middle of Commercial Street, perhaps cursing and screaming at passerbys, cannot be helped by uniformed, armed police. Controlled maybe, but not helped. The only appropriate response is one that can only be provided by Mental Health professionals.

As we are all aware, the situation for implementing a cahoots-type program has radically changed over the

last week or so with the Congressional adoption of as funding package for implementing and funding on-going operations of MCUs. Given that Oregon programs were prominently mentioned, in my opinion, gives us even more reason to do this program and do it well!

While aplauding the efforts of Councilor Nordyke I've been puzzled, perhaps troubled is a better word, by the

seemingly total absence of support given her by City staff and other Councilors.

I strongly recommend that you schedule a work session to thoroughly study the new Federal support for MCUs

and that such a program be adopted posthaste.

Regards,

Les Margosian

Ward 8

From: noreply@cityofsalem.net on behalf of M.aosved@gmail.com
To: [citycouncil](#)
Subject: Contact City Council
Date: Monday, September 26, 2022 4:32:44 AM
Attachments: [ATT00001.bin](#)

Your Name	Marni Aosved
Your Email	M.aosved@gmail.com
Your Phone	3605997725
Street	900 State St
City	Salem
State	OR
Zip	97301
Message	Support for Agenda Item 5a (Motion from Councilor Vanessa Nordyke concerning a Request for Proposals for a Mobile Crisis Unit) It is becoming increasingly evident that the Salem Police Department (SPD) is not qualified to handle situations of crisis, particularly situations involving mental health or drug-related crises. This is not a matter of needing more training for the officers, which has been encouraged in the past. This situation can only be solved with the inclusion of a community-based aid network that provides assistance to those in need. We cannot continue to let the SPD cause the people they serve physical, emotional, and financial harm due to incompetence. I appreciate your consideration of this agenda item.

This email was generated by the dynamic web forms contact us form on 9/26/2022.

From: [Melissa Montigny](#)
To: [citycouncil](#)
Cc: [CityRecorder](#)
Subject: Support for Agenda Item 5.a (Motion from Councilor Vanessa Nordyke concerning a Request for Proposals for a Mobile Crisis Unit)
Date: Sunday, September 25, 2022 7:30:47 PM

Please vote YES on the motion from Councilor Vanessa Nordyke concerning a Request for Proposals for a Mobile Crisis Unit. Civilian-based mobile crisis units are being created in cities across the country to serve people in crisis. We need social workers, mental health and medical professionals to respond to people who are struggling. Mobile crisis units also free up other first responders, like police, fire, and ambulance, for higher acuity calls. Mobile crisis units complete the public safety spectrum.

Thank you.

Melissa Montigny

From: [Mary Nikas](#)
To: [CityRecorder](#)
Subject: Support for Agenda Item 5.a (Motion from Councilor Vanessa Nordyke concerning a Request for Proposals for a Mobile Crisis Unit)
Date: Monday, September 26, 2022 11:37:59 AM

Hello,

I want to urge each of you to vote for Councilor Nordyke's proposal to move forward with a Mobile Crisis Unit here in Salem. The MCU has been proven successful in other cities and is a real way that we can meet people where they are, and ease the burden on our police resources.

Let's keep making real progress in servicing our community!

In Solidarity,

Mary Nikas

"When we all stand together, there is nothing we cannot accomplish."

~ U.S. Senator, Bernie Sanders

If you know someone who may want to buy or sell a home, send them to people you trust!
The BUSY BEES TEAM

From: [Melanie Weston](#)
To: [citycouncil](#)
Subject: Agenda Item 5.a
Date: Sunday, September 25, 2022 11:57:57 AM

I am voicing my support of agenda item 5.a concerning a request for proposals for a Mobile Crisis Unit. I own a business in downtown Salem and see this unit could be a GREAT help to our mentally challenged homeless population.

Melanie Weston
Salem on the Edge fine art gallery
156 Liberty St. NE, Salem, OR. 97301

salemontheedge.com | 503-884-0635
[Facebook](#) | Instagram: @salemontheedge

From: [Pat Donenfeld](#)
To: [CityRecorder](#)
Subject: Agenda Item 5.a re Mobile Crisis Unit
Date: Saturday, September 24, 2022 1:54:29 PM

I fully support Councilor Vanessa Nordyke's motion regarding a Request for Proposals for Mobile Crisis Unit(s). Having looked at the success of similar units, including Eugene's CAHOOTS program, I see this as a necessary tool for the City and its' residents.

Pat Donenfeld
Ward 7

Sent from my iPhone

From: [Chandrasclinic](#)
To: [CityRecorder](#); [Vanessa Nordyke](#); [Virginia Stapleton](#); [citycouncil](#); [Chuck Bennett](#)
Subject: Support agenda item 5a city council meeting September 26, 2022
Date: Monday, September 26, 2022 8:06:05 AM

Honorable Mayor Bennet, Councilor Nordyke, and respected councilors

I am writing in support of agenda item 5 a 22-448. This is the motion moved by Honorable Councilor Nordyke concerning a request for proposals for mobile crisis unit for the city of salem.

I ask all of you to kindly vote and support this motion.

I am a psychiatrist and practiced in Oregon for nearly 22 years and served in two other countries prior to coming to US in 1996. My work extends from eastern Oregon 12 counties to Lane, Douglas county besides Salem. I also serve as the chief medical officer from Greater oregon behavioral health care inc and Salem Keizer School board Director. Formerly, I was the President of Oregon Psychiatric Association, Board member of American Association of community psychiatrists.

A mobile crisis team will be an addition to the menus of options to serve those who are in psychiatric or mental health crisis or urgency. For many persons and families who have a loved one in need of urgent psychiatric care, having a mobile crisis team provide stabilizing care in the community will be acceptable.

Psychiatric crisis care outside the hospital emergency setting is provided by stand alone psychiatric crisis center or mobile crisis.

Mobile mental health crisis team should be in addition to city ensuring all salem police officers are CIT trained and certified and also expand the salem Police Co Responder teams.

In mobile crisis response team two staff members work as a team and one of them is trained mental health personnel. **There is no law enforcement officers.** They have up to 72 hours from the decision to send to respond. The person in need has to **voluntarily** accept the care. They need to coordinate and have an effective next level of care available to refer or hand off, otherwise they often end up making repeated attempts until the crisis escalates.

This should not replace other options in the mobile crisis response including all Salem Police officers with CIT trained and certified and expansion of Salem police co responder teams to seven days a week. In salem police co responder model a police officer and a mental health professional ride along to serve.

When the **dangerousness is high in the mental health crisis** for example a person with mental health crisis who has firearms and barricaded themselves, hostage situation or **immediate intervention is needed and time is sensitive**, often mobile unit will end up **asking for or needing law enforcement model of service to intervene or assist.**

Coordination with Marion County mental health program, local hospitals, Salem VA clinic, school districts, local CCO and other agencies providing services is vital to ensure there is good seamless coordination.

While mobile crisis unit is still a form of emergency response, ideally we need to start intervening upstream at the level of pre crisis services, work to change the antiquated civil commitment and mental health laws in our state.

Thank you very much for this important proposal and please vote in favor.

My Gratitude for your services to our city.

With Regards

Satyanarayana Chandragiri MD

Resident of Salem, Oregon.

Salem Keizer School board Director zone 4

Member of Marion County Mental Health Advisory Board

Psychiatrist Salem Health, Chandras Clinic, Salem, Oregon

From: [Sarah Evans](#)
To: [citycouncil](#); [CityRecorder](#)
Subject: Support for Agenda Item 5.a (Motion from Councilor Vanessa Nordyke concerning a Request for Proposals for a Mobile Crisis Unit)
Date: Sunday, September 25, 2022 10:18:02 PM

Dear Salem City Councilors,

I am writing to urge you to please vote yes on Agenda Item 5.a, Councilor Vanessa Nordyke's motion concerning a Request for Proposals for a Mobile Crisis Unit. Civilian-based mobile crisis units are being created in cities across the country to serve people in crisis. Social workers, mental health and medical professionals are much better qualified to respond to people who are struggling than the police. Mobile crisis units also free up other first responders, such as police or fire, for higher acuity calls. Mobile crisis units have been proven in other cities to save money and save lives.

Thank you for reading, and I hope you will vote yes on Councilor Nordyke's motion.

Sincerely,
Sarah Evans
Resident of Salem Ward 1

From: [sean.nikas](#)
To: [CityRecorder](#); [citycouncil](#)
Subject: Support for Agenda item 5.a (Motion from Councilor Vanessa Nordyke
Date: Monday, September 26, 2022 9:21:40 AM

Dear City Council and Staff Members,

As a long time resident and business owner here in Salem I feel very strongly that our City needs these mobile crisis units.

Mobile crisis units are fiscally prudent and conservative. They have a track record of providing superior services at a reduced cost and free up police time to respond to urgent crimes.

Sean Nikas
SeanNikas@gmail.com

From: [Shaundi](#)
To: [citycouncil](#); [CityRecorder](#)
Subject: Please vote YES to support CAHOOTS (Agenda 5.a)!
Date: Saturday, September 24, 2022 3:02:22 PM

(Regarding agenda item 5.a)

Please vote YES on the motion from Councilor Vanessa Nordyke concerning a Request for Proposals for a Mobile Crisis Unit. Civilian-based mobile crisis units are being created in cities across the country to serve people in crisis. We need social workers, mental health and medical professionals to respond to people who are struggling. Mobile crisis units also free up other first responders, like police, fire, and ambulance, for higher acuity calls. Mobile crisis units complete the public safety spectrum.

Thank you.

Shaundi Woolley
Salem Resident

From: [Jim Scheppke](#)
To: [CityRecorder](#)
Cc: [citycouncil](#)
Subject: Testimony on Agenda Item 6d at the 9/26 Council Meeting
Date: Friday, September 23, 2022 7:29:45 PM

Dear Salem City Council:

Before you accept the “Business as Usual” arguments of the Salem Fire Department you need to at least get a second opinion.

As you know we have a structural deficit in the Salem General Fund that threatens future funding for parks, libraries and other city services that are vital to our quality of life in Salem. The Salem Fire Department currently spends one out of every four General Fund dollars and the Chief seems to want an even bigger share according to his report to you.

It is time you had a work session to look at alternatives to throwing more money at the Fire Department. Fortunately, we have a expert just up the road — our former Oregon Secretary of State, Phil Keisling, who could share some best practices from other cities that have been able to reform their emergency response services to cost less, not more.

Please read this article that appeared in *Governing* magazine a few years ago and consider inviting Mr. Keisling to share his research and expertise with you.

Jim

Why We Need to Take the ‘Fire’ Out of ‘Fire Department’

Firefighters don't actually fight that many fires these days. It's time to re-think how we deliver costly emergency services.

June 26, 2015 • [Phil Keisling](#)

It's arguably the best known, least acknowledged and most inconvenient truth in local government: "Fire departments" -- in the precise meaning of that label -- no longer exist anywhere in America.

Thousands of official entities bear this or a similar moniker. But given what

they and their employees actually do, "Emergency Medical, Incident Response and Every-Once-in-a-While-an-Actual-Fire Department" would be far more accurate.

In 1980, according to the National Fire Protection Association, the nation's 30,000 fire departments responded to 10.8 million emergency calls. About 3 million were classified as fires. By 2013, total calls had nearly tripled to 31.6 million, while fire calls had plummeted to 1.24 million, of which just 500,000 of were actual structure fires. For America's 1.14 million career and volunteer firefighters, that works out to an average of just one structure fire every other year.

In my own community of Portland, Ore., the Fire and Rescue department's 500-plus fulltime fire professionals respond to more than 70,000 911 calls each year. About 70 percent are medical calls, a typical proportion for most jurisdictions. Just 700 annual calls involve burning buildings

Let's be clear at the outset: The volunteers and career professionals in this field routinely risk their lives in service to their communities. Real and potential fires pose genuine hazards, and people skilled in fire suppression will always be needed, as will expensive, sophisticated fire equipment.

Firefighters often are very busy; one San Francisco fire engine company responds to 40 calls a day. But most calls are either medical emergencies or involve non-life-threatening requests (including false alarms) that plague fire departments everywhere.

In Portland, San Francisco, and many other communities, the typical 911 call results in the dispatch of both a fire truck and an ambulance. The result is an increasingly familiar tableau: Five or six gear-laden firefighters and/or ambulance personnel arriving on the scene, regardless of whether there's a fire, stroke, or a heart attack in progress -- or a passed-out homeless person on the sidewalk, or a motorist slightly dazed in a fender bender. (While cat-in-tree rescues are more urban myth than reality, they still happen.).

Fire officials vehemently defend their existing protocols. Firefighters, they say, need the extra time to suit up and board big rigs in case they must re-deploy to a real fire during a medical call. And they note that firefighters often save lives

when they arrive first on the scene.

However, such "medical saves" aren't primarily the result of firefighters' superior medical-intervention skills. They're far more a function of the fact that too few paramedics and ambulances -- and still so many fire trucks and fire stations -- dot our urban and suburban landscapes, as many elected officials who've unsuccessfully tried to close a fire station know.

Most firefighters, at best, have only an Emergency Medical Technical certification. Although more certified paramedics are being hired, they still comprise less than 30 percent of many cities' forces. Paramedics also cost more -- a handy rationale for continuing to hire for the past, not the future -- and are increasingly hard to recruit and keep amidst job requirements that they also fight the occasional fire.

While firefighters' working realities have changed profoundly in recent decades, their government structures and operating protocols remain largely frozen in bureaucratic amber. Add to this mix near-universal citizen approval, tradition and powerful unions, and incremental improvements, when they happen at all, are often contentious and add even more costs.

In 2012, the city of Toronto, over the Fire Department's objections, changed protocols to deploy ambulances (from a separate government unit) instead of EMT-staffed fire trucks for more than 50 types of medical emergencies. The next year, after city staff recommended a budget that would close four fire stations and cut 84 firefighting jobs--while adding 56 paramedics--firefighter-funded TV ads alleged that the cuts would "put lives at risk."

This isn't just a big-city problem. In 2013, a faculty-led research team for Portland State University's Center for Public Service (which I direct) [analyzed two years of 911 calls](#) for three small cities collectively contracting with a nearby city's fire/EMS department. Known medical calls comprised 75 percent of these incidents.

Our team identified a number of lower-cost operating alternatives, such as adding many more ambulances or specially-designed Rapid Response Vehicles (RRVs) to produce faster response times. We learned of one jurisdiction that had strategically purchased a three-bedroom house in a high 911-call

generating area near a nursing home for an ambulance and its crew.

Vastly increasing the number of pre-positioned ambulances and adding RRVs aren't the only potential innovations. One veteran firefighter I know suggests motorcycle-riding paramedics, especially during rush-hour traffic jams, equipped with basic medical kits including heart defibrillators.

Unnecessarily high operating costs are the most visible result of clinging to an expensive, "just-in-case" delivery model for this core public service. Another is the unnecessary wear and tear on expensive fire trucks, which can easily cost \$1 million or more. (Last year, 4,000 new ones were purchased across the country.).

Perhaps the biggest cost of the status quo is the least discussed. When scarce fire/emergency medical personnel are routinely dispatched for non-emergencies -- and then a bona fide, "every-minute-counts" emergency does occur, especially near a now-vacated station -- it's cold comfort when a 10-minute response time from a backup crew is a few minutes too slow to save a 65-year-old in sudden cardiac arrest, or a 7-year-old suffering a severe allergic reaction.

While reforms are slowly happening, the standard response by fire departments and firefighter unions to too-slow response times is still more fire stations, fire trucks and firefighters. That isn't just an unrealistic non-starter for most cash-strapped local governments, especially as America's rapidly aging population generates even more non-fire 911 calls. It's also a doubling down on a long-outdated delivery model that requires a fundamental re-thinking.

Jim Scheppke, Ward 2
jscheppke@comcast.net