

***FINAL  
REPORT***

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Summary Assessment of the  
Stratford Emergency Medical  
Services

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Conducted by CBG Strategies, LLC

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August 23, 2010

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## **I. Overview**

The Mayor of the Town of Stratford retained CBG Strategies, LLC, to provide a summary assessment of the Stratford Emergency Medical Services (SEMS). The goal of the Mayor is to aid SEMS in overcoming their current organizational challenges and to foster the development of SEMS into an efficient, effective EMS agency. As a first stage in this process, we collected and reviewed financial data, administrative documents, contracts, and agreements. We were on site in Stratford on three separate days (April 14, May 10, and May 22, 2010) in order to interview Town officials and EMS personnel.

On April 14, we met with the Mayor; his Chief of Staff; the Police and Fire Chiefs; the EMS Administrator; the Acting Finance Director; and three volunteers from Stratford EMS. On May 10, we met again with the Mayor; again with the EMS Administrator; the EMS departmental Secretary; eight paid and volunteer EMTs; and seven officers of SEMS. On May 22, we met with seven members of the EMS Volunteer Association Board and membership.

Upon reviewing support documentation and completing interviews, we evaluated the situation of SEMS and compared it with other similar EMS services in the region and with industry standards. Contained in the following are a digest of outstanding problems identified within SEMS and a list of recommendations for resolving these problems.

The recommendations below are separated into Short-Term Recommendations (Section III) and Long-Term Recommendations (Section IV). Short-Term Recommendations should be implemented immediately. This rough framework will aid in the analysis and decision-making required to move forward with the long-term recommendations aimed to extract SEMS from its current problems. The Town leadership and administration will need to come together to review these recommendations and develop a solid strategy to ensure the future success of SEMS.

## **II. Observations**

Stratford Emergency Medical Service (SEMS) has been serving the community of Stratford for over 30 years. The members of SEMS have been dedicated public servants and have developed a reputation of caring for the community. The citizens of Stratford regularly commend Stratford EMS for the high level of patient care. The local EMS Explorer Post has received many regional, state and national awards; Stratford EMS was recognized as the National EMS Agency of the Year. Unfortunately, this success has been mitigated by several problems – internal and external – that have limited their scope and advancement.

Historically, SEMS has been the object of neglect, manipulation, and interference by the previous leaders of the Town of Stratford. SEMS has been shuffled around in a variety of different management and reporting structures while at the same time, individuals outside of SEMS have been interfering with hiring and management issues. Internally,

there have been various interpersonal conflicts, with accusations of nepotism, incompetence, malfeasance, insubordination, etc. These internal issues have been exacerbated by the lack of management and reporting structure within SEMS and the lack of political resolve within the Town's executive offices to support the EMS Administrator during times of conflict and crisis.

Currently, SEMS is at a crossroads. The construction of a new EMS facility is a physical manifestation of advancement for SEMS. However, SEMS is not in a position to move forward successfully in its present state. There are several major issues in the current SEMS organization that require resolution to ensure that the future of SEMS will be a success. Lack of clarity regarding responsibilities has led to work not being completed, goals not being met, and a higher than necessary percentage of emergency calls being passed to private services for response. The EMS Administrator is left to complete tasks that should have been completed by officers and, as a result, is unable to fulfill all of the requirements for her position. With no system to review performance and enforce the rules, the EMS Administrator has been left with no real ability to discipline staff when necessary.

Nearly every person interviewed stated that SEMS is in poor condition internally and requires assistance to resolve their problems. Some common themes arose during the interview process. One of the most important trends that came to light is the current state of toxic relationships between many different individuals within SEMS. Removing/resolving these relationships and conflicts will be critical in ensuring the future success of SEMS.

SEMS currently suffers from infighting between certain groups within the service. Each faction attributes the current problems of SEMS to other groups or individuals. The interview process revealed that the problems are the joint responsibility of all of the individuals and groups casting accusations, while the majority of the organization simply attempts to do their jobs and serve the community without walking into the crossfire between the factions.

Past efforts to change and modernize SEMS have failed due to lack of political will of the Town's previous leaders, resistance from various factions within SEMS, or personal conflicts within and without SEMS. The Town of Stratford will need to dedicate energy and resources to the rehabilitation of SEMS. This will require a steward to facilitate the process, deal with conflicts, coach individuals on systems and procedures, and have the hard – but necessary – conversations.

### **Relevant Outcomes from Interview Process**

- SEMS has been given neither the proper status nor respect as a vital public safety service by the previous Town administrations. The reporting structure has changed many times over the past five years, making oversight, responsibility, and performance difficult to measure or enforce.

- There was significant political interference in the operations and management of SEMS during the previous administration; the baggage of this interference has led to an underlying sense of distrust for the Mayor and the Town Council among members of SEMS.
- The SEMS leadership is ineffective; the EMS Administrator has very little real authority, there is no real chain of command, and no means of enforcement or discipline. Factions and personal allegiances/conflicts have replaced the normal structure of an EMS agency.
- The lines of communication within the department are ineffectual and parochial, with the bare minimum being done to disseminate information and no attempts to create a collaborative and positive work environment. There are few departmental meetings, most of which are poorly attended. Memos are used in place of face-to-face communication; most officers rarely communicate with their fellow officers.
- The process of recruiting, processing, and retaining volunteers has become ineffectual. This is attributed to:
  - Nonexistent/ineffective recruiting efforts;
  - Slow and burdensome HR process which has led many potential recruits to withdraw their application and go to neighboring departments; and
  - Personal conflicts and behavior of certain officers that has negatively impacted retention.
- The infighting, personal conflicts, and generally poor behavior of some of the officers and other volunteers have created a toxic and dysfunctional atmosphere within SEMS. Some individuals will act or refrain from acting, solely to oppose the other party; both factions share a portion of the liability for this situation.
- Fortunately, many of the volunteers are not concerned with the infighting and ineffectiveness among the departmental leadership; they simply want to work their hours. This is probably the key to the success that SEMS continues to achieve.
- According to several staff members, there are many volunteers who are both talented and interested in serving as officers, but the general consensus is that the current members of the officers' corps are completely unable to work together toward the common good of SEMS.
- The process of choosing officers has been manipulated and ignored in the past by the Town's political structure.
- Many interviewees reported considerable confusion about the role of the Stratford Volunteer EMS Association. Some citizens view the Association as the official EMS entity; the Association acts much like a union for volunteers.
- The EMS Finance Committee is viewed as unnecessary by many interviewees. It removes the Chief from the fiscal process, and is a means for the Volunteer Association and the fire department to be disproportionately involved in the official funding process for the EMS department. This structure is not in line with either the finance/budget process of the other public safety services in Stratford or other EMS services in the region.
- An inordinately high percentage of emergency calls are passed to private ambulance services, in comparison with other municipal EMS services in the area. This is a result of dispatching issues; long turnaround issues at the hospitals; and shortages

in staffing during some peak hours. This higher than normal percentage of calls going to mutual aid providers means a loss of revenue for SEMS.

- The SEMS Secretary spends considerable time collecting information that the private billing vendor should be collecting in order to process bills to insurers. Currently, the Secretary collects the Patient Care Reports, gathers any information that has not been completed by the EMTs, and mails the packet of Reports on a weekly basis to the billing vendor (Certified Ambulance Group). This reduces the time available for handling the administrative matters for SEMS. The vendor then simply mails a bill and collects the payment on the Town's behalf, for a fee of 8% of total collections.
- Some officers and volunteers mentioned compliance concerns, especially the delayed implementation of the electronic Patient Care Report (ePCR) system; and, the utilization of Glucometers, which the State allows to be used by EMTs, but which are not required. According to several people associated with the process, the delays with the ePCR implementation have been largely external, and they are scheduled to "go live" in the next month. The Glucometer issue seems to be a matter of differing opinions and does not represent a compliance issue; the Chief and the Officers should address the issue.

### **III. Short Term Recommendations**

These recommendations should be implemented immediately and the separate projects structured for completion within approximately 90 days after implementation.

#### **Organizational Changes - Town of Stratford**

- Place Stratford EMS within the city government on the same level as the other public safety services. The position of EMS Administrator should be eliminated and replaced with the position of EMS Chief. The EMS Chief should report directly to the Office of the Mayor just as the Chiefs of the other public safety services do. The EMS Chief should have the same occupational benefits and administrative responsibilities as the other public safety chiefs and should not be a member of any bargaining unit.
- The Office of the Mayor should be communicating with all public safety Chiefs together on a regular basis. This will aid in cementing the institutional view that SEMS and its Chief are critical, valuable elements in the town government.

#### **Organizational Changes - SEMS**

- Begin hiring process for a Deputy Chief. This individual should be an experienced EMS professional and the search should concentrate on individuals from outside the Stratford community. This position should be a complimentary position to the Chief. The job description needs to be written in conjunction with the revision of the job description for the Chief.
- Review SEMS departmental structure and all SEMS positions. Begin process of review and evaluation of all job descriptions. Some of the current positions may need to be restructured or eliminated while new positions may need to be created.

For example, the Deputy Chief position will likely consolidate some duties that were the responsibility of some current officers. The EMS Chief will be reporting directly to the Office of the Mayor, thus there is no need for one of the officers to act as the Mayor's Liaison.

- Review hiring and promotion policies and establish standards-based guidelines for future hiring of Chief, captains, lieutenants, and volunteers.
- Evaluate the possibility of converting volunteer officer positions to paid career positions. Establishment of paid officer positions will enhance execution within the department and allow for supervisors on additional days and shifts.
- Review SEMS policy manual and revise to include clear rights and responsibilities of all members of SEMS. Make clear and specific rules on disciplinary procedures for non-compliance and not fulfilling responsibilities. Include policy on hiring of relatives. Communicate these policies to all members of SEMS and the leadership of the other public safety services.
- Officers must have clear goals which are formulated annually by the officer and their superior.
- Officers must be evaluated no less than twice annually. The evaluation must be based upon that officer's performance in relation to their stated goals.
- Establish systematic performance review and reporting structure.
- The financial and budgeting process should be standardized to match all other Town departments.
- The billing vendor seemingly charges a high rate for the level of service that they provide. The same vendor charges lower rates to other clients. The Town should issue an RFP to vendors in the State of Connecticut.

### **Professional Development for EMS Chief**

The EMS Chief should receive training/coaching on the following issues to facilitate the position as the leader and manager of SEMS:

- Communicating Within the Organization
- Managing and Evaluating Staff
- Productivity and Time Management
- Managing Difficult Conversations
- Conflict Resolution
- Delegation

### **Professional Development for EMS Officers and Staff**

Just as the Chief requires professional development assistance, professional development needs to be a high priority for SEMS officers and staff. This ensures that the skills of SEMS staff are always at a high standard and SEMS is showing its interest in fostering the development and advancement for its members. The following training should be arranged:

- General Public Management and Leadership (strongly recommended)
- Working in Teams
- Vehicle operation courses such as CEVO or EVOC
- Conflict Resolution

- Clinical modules for continuing education

### **Political and Administrative Oversight**

- The Mayor must fully endorse and vocally support SEMS and the Chief. He will need to actively support the chain of command of the department, and not allow members of the department to circumvent the management structure of SEMS. Individuals with conflicts should be referred to the human resources department for remediation according to the human resource policies of the Town of Stratford and the policies of SEMS.
- The Town government, administration, and elected officials must commit to cease all undue involvement in departmental hiring, promotions, and operational functions and processes.
- Hiring and promotion of SEMS officers should be set by Town ordinance; panel members should be named by position, and the process formalized. The hiring process for new recruits should be modified to expedite the "hiring" of new volunteers. The Mayor should direct the HR director to work with the EMS Chief to make corrections to this process.

### **Recruitment and Retention**

- Training classes for new EMTs are an essential means of recruiting volunteers. SEMS must capitalize on and expand the current EMT training offered by the Association. The students must be more fully and fluidly engaged with SEMS during their time in the class and SEMS must keep in constant contact with students completing the course. The establishment of an early line of communication with students and a seamless flow from classroom to SEMS volunteer will lead to improved recruitment of new staff.
- A defined rewards program must be implemented for staff. Volunteers and paid staff, alike, must feel appreciated and be compensated appropriately for meeting the established goals. Such goals should include hard, objective performance standards (percentage of mutual aid calls, billing collection percentages and response times) as well as soft, subjective goals (teamwork, communication ability, commitment).
- The Town, SEMS, and administration should begin a program to recognize the work of SEMS volunteers – including small social events and an annual awards dinner to recognize number of hours worked, deliveries, saves, etc. These social events will allow members of the department to feel appreciated and to get to know each other (as many work differing shifts on different days).

## **IV. Long Term Recommendations**

Upon completion of the evaluation process and the rest of the short-term recommendations, the Town of Stratford and SEMS will be prepared to make some of the more difficult changes necessary to move beyond the current conflicts and dysfunction.

## **Organizational Changes**

- Initiate a policy of mandatory service time in an ambulance for all SEMS officers.
- Establish term limits for all officers. The recommended term of service is three years with 1/3 of the officers replaced annually. Officers leaving their position at the end of their term limits are unable to apply for another officer position until one calendar year has passed.
- Establish mandatory weekly meetings for Chief, Deputy Chief, and all officers.
- Establish mandatory bi-monthly meetings for all members of SEMS including volunteers. Officers or volunteers who miss two consecutive meetings should be sanctioned/suspended from duty.
- The leadership of SEMS must be formalized, and the chain of command must be reestablished. All officers must know to whom they report and all superiors must know who reports to them. Currently, there exists a clear communications disconnect within the chain.
- Formal disciplinary procedures must be established. The ability to remove employees and/or volunteers that fail to meet the requirements and duties of their position must be explicit.
- Hiring and firing authority over subordinate staff must be given to the Chief. It is difficult and confusing for a Chief to evaluate staff yet not be able to implement disciplinary measures to address poor performance.

## **Planning and Goals**

Once the short-term changes have been implemented and the situation within SEMS stabilizes, the Office of the Mayor and the SEMS leadership need to develop a strategic plan and establish long-term goals. A long term plan should be prepared that will outline the transition from a corps of officers that are all volunteers and work varying shifts, to an officer corps of fulltime employees that serve as shift commanders; this transition may take a few years to fully implement.

The EMS Chief should be given the means to effectively operate the department, but also the responsibility for such effective operation. Clear and measurable goals (such as: number of calls going to mutual aid, response times, training opportunities, etc) should be assigned by the Mayor, with a process for regular review of progress.

One of the most important goals to be established is related to calls going to mutual aid. The number of calls that are transferred to mutual aid agencies must be reduced; this must be included as a measurable goal for the Chief and officers of the department; all calls that go to a private ambulance provider are lost revenue for the Town of Stratford and SEMS. Some estimates are that the department loses roughly \$500,000 per annum in potential revenue through transports given to private ambulances. If SEMS is to become a professional department, it must be able to capture a much larger portion of its potential revenue.

Just as the Chief will work with the Mayor to establish goals and performance, the Chief will work with each of the officers to develop clear and measurable goals. Meetings need to be held on a regular basis to review progress and assess what changes may need to be made, if any.

## V. Suggestions for further study

During the interview and evaluation period, several institutional problems outside of SEMS were brought to light. In the past, underperformance in several areas of the Stratford government has had negative effects on the performance of SEMS. These areas require further evaluation to determine the veracity of the reports made during the interview process and to develop solutions for improving the environment for SEMS and other departments in the Stratford government.

**Dispatch** – Through the course of our interviews, several issues with the Town's Dispatch operation were brought up and this service requires further review and analysis. The department reports to the Fire Chief, but has no immediate supervisor. The dispatch center is also located two buildings away from the Fire Department, making day-to-day supervision very difficult. There also seems to be an opportunity to create a regional partnership for dispatch services.

**Human Resources** – The established Human Resources mechanism within the Town of Stratford government has repeatedly failed to support SEMS in the hiring of volunteers and paid staff. There have been multiple reports of applications and other paperwork not being processed in a timely manner, if at all. This failure has led to the current problems with volunteer staffing. HR has also facilitated some of the past conflicts between staff members, through action or inaction. According to interviewed staff members, reports of problems and conflicts have gone unresolved. Staff members feel that no positive action has been taken by the HR administration to help resolve conflicts and problems within SEMS and between SEMS and other departments.

**Internal Communication** – According to several staff members interviewed, the past executives of Stratford were inadequate managers and communicators. These inadequacies led to interdepartmental conflicts and fostered many of the problems within SEMS. The current administration is dealing with baggage from the past leaders' problems. The current leadership should work to develop a strong internal communication, reporting, and evaluation network among the department managers/chiefs across the Stratford government.

**Council of Chiefs** – Initiate regular meetings and communication between the Chiefs and Deputy Chiefs of the public safety services. This will foster healthier relations and professional relationship development among the services and an open forum for communication to aid in conflict resolution.

**Professional Development for Fire/Police Chiefs** – During several interviews, problems and conflicts resulting from inadequacies in the management and leadership of each of the Chiefs of the public safety services came to light. All of the Chiefs and their leadership teams would likely benefit from an objective evaluation of their management and leadership skills (i.e., 360° Profile) and training to help them improve areas in which they are currently lacking, and from the same training recommended for the SEMS Chief.