

**CONVENING 20
OF THE OREGON 24
FIRE SERVICE 4**



**SUMMARY &
SOLUTIONS**



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INTRODUCTION

Oregon fire service leaders gathered at the Oregon State Fire Marshal headquarters in June 2024 to discuss critical issues facing the fire service.

This group met as a subcommittee of the Governor's Fire Service Policy Council to meet the intent of ORS 476.680(6).

The Oregon fire service is essential to the safety of millions of people, providing fire protection, emergency response, and emergency medical services, often the first on scene when 911 is dialed.

The fire service is facing increasing external factors impacting service delivery. The frequency and intensity of calls has significantly increased, driven by population growth, unprecedented social issues, and community expansion, both into the wildland-urban interface and in housing and population density.

Over the last decade, response to Oregon's social issue calls, like fires and emergencies in houseless encampments and drug overdoses, have significantly strained the system. The response pressure to calls like this are pushing the fire service's system to the brink of collapse. Despite rising demand, fire agency budgets remain stagnant, creating a significant strain on resources and personnel.

The fire service is using innovative strategies and adaptive measures to sustain essential services despite the absence of a unified state approach to meet increasing demands. These efforts, while commendable, are reaching a breaking point.

A paradigm shift from reactive to proactive is necessary. The Oregon fire service and its leaders must identify funding solutions and shifts in public expectations for response to meet the demands of current conditions. The fire service needs long-term and sustainable investments to ensure adequate service across the state.

A community risk reduction approach and basic prevention are the way of the future, saving substantial financial resources downstream by preventing costly damages and minimizing response expenses.

This document discusses critical issues and explores the systemic changes required to modernize and stabilize the fire service's capacity to assist and protect Oregon's communities. By embracing proactive solutions and advocating for increased funding, the fire service can rise to the challenges of today and the future.



LEADING - SERVING - SUPPORTING





"It's never been more apparent to the Oregon fire service that we're doing more with less. Operating on 1990s staffing levels, our needs have never been more demanding, and retaining and recruiting firefighters is more difficult than ever. The time is now for all Oregonians to invest in essential services across our state. The convening of the Oregon fire service is the first step in ensuring protection for all Oregonians, both for fire and emergency medical services."

Karl Koenig, President of Oregon State Fire Fighters Council

"To effectively address the funding challenges with EMS in Oregon, it is imperative that action is taken at the state level."

Chief Amy Hanifan, McMinnville Fire District



"The fire service responds to every call, every time. We don't ever say "no, we're not coming." If we run out of resources, our neighbors provide mutual aid. Someone always answers the call, and that's unique to the fire service. However, what we're experiencing now is our neighbors are unable to support mutual aid like before. Just a few years ago when we called for mutual aid, all our neighbors participated. Today, we are lucky to get one or two to respond. We have to call for resources farther and farther away if we are lucky enough to get help at all."

Chief Joseph Rodondi, Lebanon Fire District



"We're experiencing a life safety crisis with EMS and our lack of capacity to handle calls for service. Capacity comes when you have appropriate EMS funding."

Chief Jeff Blake, Jefferson County Fire District 1



"EMS is going to lead to the demise of small agencies like mine. We supplement \$25,000 to our EMS agencies every year and we can't continue. It takes away our fire response budget. The smaller agencies next to us are going to start collapsing and that will start impacting us with mutual aid. Pretty soon, we're going to start collapsing."

Chief James Oeder, Nestucca Rural Fire Protection District



"When there are no ambulances, that hampers the fire service. How many times do we want to play this game before somebody dies? It's a real life-safety issue."

Isaac McLennan, Portland Fire Fighters Association IAFF Local 43 President



The categories discussed during the Convening of the Oregon Fire Service include increased calls, emergency medical services, workforce issues, wildfire, regulations, and funding. *The critical issues highlighted in this report overlap in categories.*

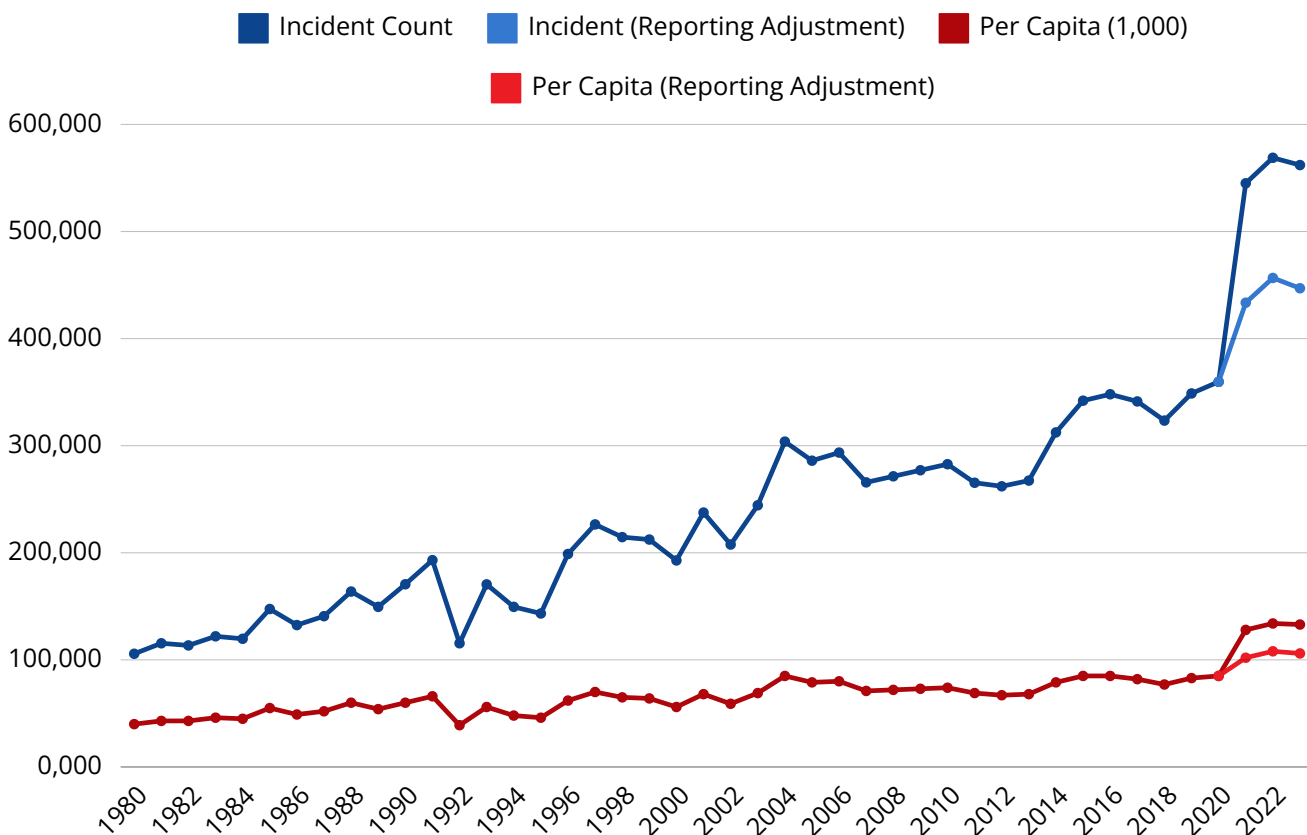
INCREASED CALLS

The significant rise in calls in recent years is caused by many things: social issues like drug overdoses and fires or medical issues in houseless and vulnerable populations; COVID-related responses; impacts from population increases; EMS issues resulting in long wait times to get fire service units back into service; and increasing service demands because of housing expansion, both in density and wildland-urban interface expansion.

Population growth in communities is driving call volume. Many areas experience a large influx of visitors, making the impact on emergency response greater.

The fire service responds to fire, all-hazard, and emergency medical services calls. From 2019-2023, rescue and EMS calls accounted for 63 percent of the overall call volume. A large driver of EMS calls are social issues identified above.

TOTAL REPORTED INCIDENTS (1980 - 2023)



Data provided by the OSFM's Analytics & Intelligence Unit

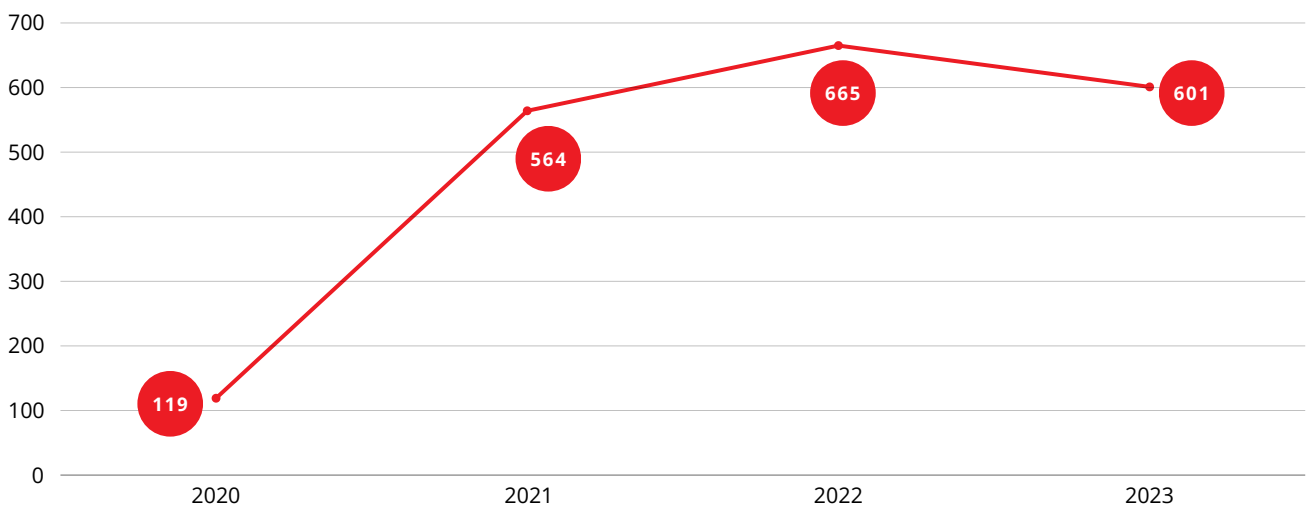
Reporting adjustment: from 2011 - 2020, Portland Fire Bureau and Salem Fire Department only submitted fire incident data to the OSFM. In 2021, both agencies began reporting aggregate data totals for non-fire incidents. This graph reflects the overall trend of incidents without the additional non-fire incidents submitted by Portland Fire Bureau and Salem Fire Department beginning in 2021.

As a result of being the primary responders to EMS calls, the fire service is experiencing critical strain. These calls are challenging, demand significant resources and time, and are not funded. The current model is unsustainable.

One example of a strain affecting the fire service is the fentanyl epidemic, causing multiple overdoses in users. The use of Narcan is causing a cyclical response need from the fire service: patients are given Narcan and refuse transport, then overdose again.

Since 2020, fatal overdoses involving illicitly manufactured fentanyl have dramatically risen between 2020 and 2022 throughout Oregon, increasing from 223 to 843, nearly quadrupling in two years (State of Oregon, n.d.).

UNSHELTERED TENT/ENCAMPMENT FIRES*



Data provided by the OSFM's Analytics & Intelligence Unit



EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES

EMS is a complex issue for the fire service, causing funding shortages, a lack of staffing, and periods of time without firefighters available to respond to other calls.

Data shows there was a significant uptick in calls in 2021 and 2022, possibly correlated with the passage of Measure 110 (2021). Overdose-related emergencies are negatively impacting the response system.

The fire service is experiencing a drastic increase in EMS calls from social issues like drug overdoses and responses to fires and medical issues for people who are unhoused and socially vulnerable. These issues are resulting in a public safety crisis where the fire service is typically the frontline first responders. The fire service does not typically receive funding for these social issue calls unless they transport a patient to an emergency room. Cities and counties receive some funding.

A healthcare gap leaves fire districts with more patients and the responsibility of transporting or providing services. Patients without appropriate preventative medical care or transportation to hospitals or care facilities rely on 911 and the fire service to fill this need. Elderly patient requests are also increasing. Strains on Medicare reimbursements are impacting for-profit ambulance services and leave fire agencies with another void to fill on resources stretched thin.

Oregon's licensing and scope for EMTs and paramedics is far greater than national standards, making it difficult to attract people with this skillset from other states. This affects the fire system as a whole, burdening rural areas the most.

EMS calls are expensive; the true cost includes personnel time, apparatus, and medical equipment. The fire service being the first response model without transport revenue is unrealistic for long-term service stability.



The fire service has no reimbursement model or revenue source for EMS response without transport, even though these calls are the majority of responses. Ambulance service areas are an unfunded mandate and fire service taxes are supplementing EMS services. If Oregon could solve the EMS funding issue, it would improve fire response. Less than 10 percent of calls require a paramedic, yet paramedics are sent to 911 calls because of a lack of a clear response model in the state for these non-urgent calls. Paramedics provide critical assessment and treatment to patients requiring advanced life support level care.



Lebanon Fire experienced a significant increase in overdose responses, now averaging 300 overdose responses a year. Jackson County Fire District 3 had more than 460 overdose and drug-related calls in 2023, representing five percent of their total call volume.

EMS SOLUTIONS

NON-LEGISLATIVE

- The fire service needs to explore new models to fund EMS response overall.
- Oregon must explore options for paramedic scope of practice along with EMT use and training to increase effectiveness.
- The fire service must explore partnering with community care organization systems and insurance providers including Medicare and Medicaid.
- The Ground Emergency Medical Transport (GEMT) program requires review to provide ease of access for providers and program transparency.
- Standardize first response EMS requirements for certification, training, equipment, etc.
- Continue support for data collection and use for system improvement and funding.

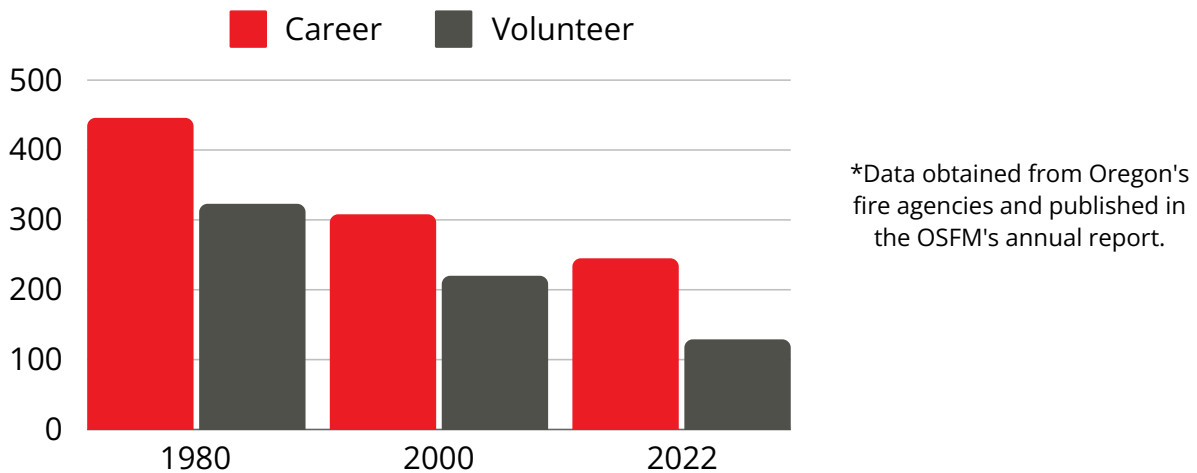
LEGISLATIVE

- Explore ways to fund the fire service for the high number of social issue response EMS calls.
- Look at legislative options regarding the emergency room healthcare gap that results in overuse of the fire service and emergency room.
- Allow EMS and ambulance agencies flexibility to provide alternative response services with associated funding mechanisms.
- Explore state funding pathways for EMS services, especially in Oregon's rural areas.
- Examine legislative options regarding emergency room capacity on EMS systems.
- Explore or allow funding to provide EMS services in areas impacted by high traffic or recreational use.
- Consider aligning licensing and scope of practice for EMTs and paramedics with the national standard.

DECLINING WORKFORCE

The fire service is experiencing an impactful and continuous decline in career and volunteer firefighters. The fire service must find ways to recruit and retain volunteer and career firefighters as they experience increased financial and physical strain from service demands.

OREGON STRUCTURAL FIREFIGHTERS PER CAPITA (100,000)



Public service and the Oregon fire service are a foundational part of Oregon's history. Volunteer fire companies date back to the middle 1800s and volunteer firefighters remain integral to Oregon's fire service future. Realizing community public safety needs and evolving challenges like houselessness, public health social issues and aging populations, increased professional standards, and increasing effects of tax limitations make it difficult to recruit and retain volunteer firefighters. Communities must decide how to provide fire protection in light of these challenges to meet the evolving needs of those who request help in an emergency.

Work-life balance, behavioral and physical health, and other factors are contributing to the decline in fire service personnel. The fire service needs to remedy these issues to slow the decline. Incentivizing volunteers, providing opportunities to access behavioral and physical health programs, and ensuring adequate firefighter pay and benefits are effective methods.

Substantial generational changes are facing the fire service. Younger generations must be exposed to fire service careers. Mental and physical health are a priority. The fire service must focus on reimagining what their workforce looks like to adapt. The fire service should continue to explore ways to attract more diverse candidates.

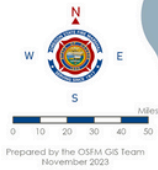
Fire agencies are understaffed and forced to do more with less. To meet the growing demand, alternative funding is essential. Despite efforts to boost staffing through incentives, educational opportunities, and career benefits, these measures are not enough to maintain paramedic licensure levels. To improve both fire and EMS outcomes, the number of firefighters, EMTs, and paramedics must be significantly increased.

STAFFING TYPES OF STRUCTURAL FIRE DISTRICTS

2023

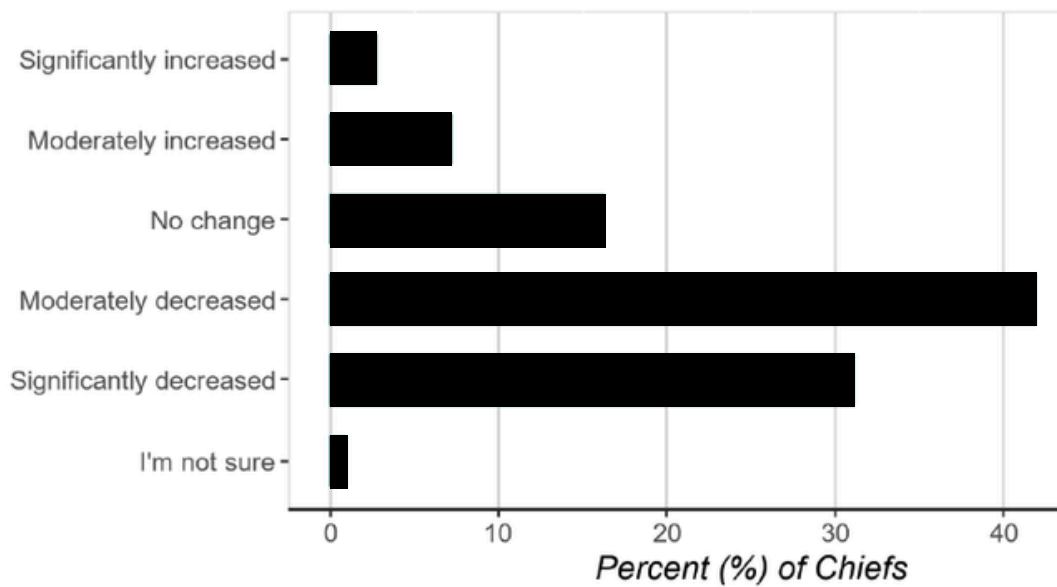
Fire Districts, by Staffing Type

- Career
- Volunteer
- Combination
- Pending
- Unknown
- County Boundaries



Data provided by the OSFM's Analytics & Intelligence Unit

Figure 1: Department Change in Number of Volunteer Firefighters Within Last Five Years



Source: Legislative Policy and Research Office
 Data: Volunteer Firefighter Recruitment and Retention Survey



Ninety-four percent of Oregon fire departments register as all-volunteer or a combination of career and volunteer firefighters.

WORKFORCE SOLUTIONS

NON-LEGISLATIVE

- The fire service should educate about the public health crisis and its impact on the fire service.
- Volunteer fire agencies could use programs like the Length of Service Award Program to attract firefighters.
- The fire service should continue outreach to younger generations for recruitment through career job fairs, explorer programs, military fairs, apprentice opportunities, etc.
- The fire service should explore pay and benefits for emergency medical technicians and paramedics to improve recruitment and retention.
- Find regional opportunities to provide essential service outside traditional fire service boundaries. This includes things like community training, emergency help, and finding new funding sources beyond property taxes.

LEGISLATIVE

- Oregon should continue to fund the OSFM's wildfire season staffing grant. For 2022 and 2023, the grant increased capacity by 3,476 firefighters in 220 communities.
- The legislature should continue investing in the Oregon Fire Fighter Apprenticeship Program; it's proven successful in reaching new firefighters, increasing capacity, and drawing diverse candidates.
- Oregon should explore how to incentivize volunteerism.
- Consider having smaller fire agencies enter agreements with bigger departments: if large departments employ current volunteers or career firefighters from smaller agencies, there could be incentives for the agency that lost the personnel member.
- Design, develop, and implement a statewide EMS funding program that would apply regardless of fire service boundaries and ASAs.

WILDFIRE CRISIS

Oregon's growing wildfire crisis is well documented. The state took a step to address it with 2021's Senate Bill 762 with funding to boost equipment, staffing, and wildfire protection programs. Senate Bill 762 provided one-time investments, but the funding is now expended, and fire agencies must find substantial amounts of money to protect their communities. While this was a step forward and provided meaningful funding, it fell short of the amount required to address the wildfire crisis.

The Oregon State Fire Marshal's grant programs offered from Senate Bill 762 funds protected Oregon communities with firefighting equipment and staff. Grant programs must be extended, especially the wildfire season staffing grant. All fire agencies, from rural fire protection districts to large departments, benefit from these programs.

The OSFM created Response Ready Oregon to address the wildfire crisis. Through these programs, the OSFM can mobilize firefighters and equipment as an incident escalates before it becomes a conflagration, preventing costly wildfires from spreading into communities. The OSFM partners with other agencies to use aircraft to stop wildfires. This has proven to be invaluable for fire districts who historically did not have access to these critical firefighting tools.

More capacity and equipment challenges exist for the fire service to respond to the increasing wildfire threat. Many departments simply lack the funding, based on the issues above, to staff for the increasing wildfire season and also lack equipment to respond. The OSFM created two programs to address these issues: the wildfire season staffing grant and the Engine Program. The staffing grant funds smaller fire agencies, 192 in 2024, to add firefighters to respond to wildfires and local calls. Through the Engine Program, the OSFM is strategically distributing 75 fire engines at local fire agencies around the state. The combination of additional capacity and fire engines has proven successful.



Wildfire is the great equalizer, no longer exclusively in rural areas. Whether there is fire near our communities or smoke in the air, wildfire impacts every Oregonian. Over the past three decades, wildfire trends shifted significantly. The western U.S. saw a 246 percent increase in structures lost to wildfires when comparing the decade from 1999-2009 to 2010-2020. Fires increasingly spread north and west, impacting regions previously considered low risk. This expansion is exacerbated by climate change, intensifying wildfire frequency, size, and severity.

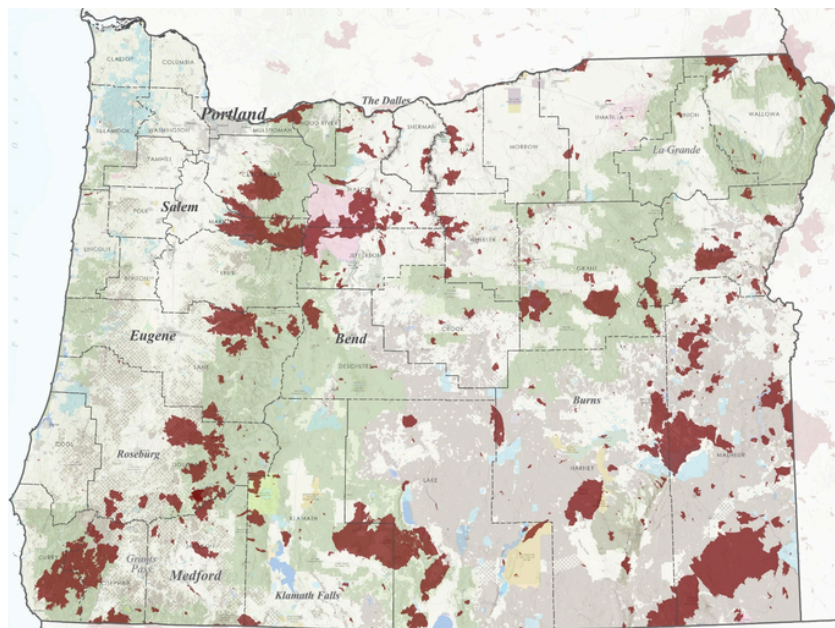
As a result, the fire season has extended, and areas with little history of wildfires now face substantial threats, stressing the importance of comprehensive risk reduction strategies to safeguard people, property, and the environment (Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission, 2023). Along with devastating losses, wildfire also affects insurance for Oregonians. If changes aren't made, the insurance market won't be stabilized. Oregon should focus on wholesale risk reduction through enhanced prevention programs and partnering with the insurance commissioner to meet industry needs.

The OSFM's defensible space program is one example of success in wildfire preparedness. This program helps home and property owners with tools to better protect their properties before they're impacted by fires.

Through various community wildfire risk reduction programs, the OSFM has lessened wildfire risk around the state, providing egress access for neighborhoods and improved ability for initial fire attack. New and creative mitigation programs are being used, like goats and other grazing animals to create defensible space in areas machines cannot access. Fire agencies want to keep these programs going, which requires continued funding.

A top wildfire mitigation funding request nationally is community wildfire risk reduction funds to build resilience and lower risk. Oregonians witnessed successes and there is a need to continue funding these valuable programs.

HISTORICAL LARGE FIRES IN OREGON FROM 2012 - 2021



Data provided by the Oregon Department of Forestry

WILDFIRE SOLUTIONS

NON-LEGISLATIVE

- The fire service should continue prevention programs and initiatives through public safety messaging.

LEGISLATIVE

- Senate Bill 762 provided one-time funding to the fire service that helped meet the growing wildfire crisis, but the funding is expended. Oregon fire agencies need continued funding for suppression, prevention, and mitigation. An example of a successful initiative is the OSFM's wildfire season staffing grant. This is the final year they have funding for it.
- Continue to fund the OSFM's Engine Program.
- Oregon should focus on wholesale risk reduction by continuing prevention programs and partnering with the Department of Consumer & Business Services to meet industry needs.



REGULATIONS

The lack of affordable housing and the building industry are creating pressures on the national fire service to downgrade certain components of fire and building codes.

Decreasing safety requirements make construction less expensive and produce more housing, but significantly increase fire and life safety issues. Reductions in life safety standards further burden the already-strained fire service and put firefighter safety at risk.

Current code issues include:

- Single stairwell requirements for certain buildings that reduce safety standards.
- Sprinkler requirements that reduce safety in certain facilities like childcare establishments and adult foster homes.

There are other emerging code issues that could reduce fire and life safety in new buildings. The safety of our firefighters and the public is the fire service's top priority. These code and standard reductions affect the safety of Oregonians and first responders.

We must find a way to navigate affordable housing issues while also upholding fire and life safety standards in our fire and life safety and building codes.



FUNDING

As previously established, the number of fire responses is increasing, yet fire agency funding remains stagnant. **Fire agencies adapt to provide more services with less money**, but the fire service is at a breaking point unless they receive appropriate levels of funding.

Rural fire protection districts are particularly vulnerable because their sole source of revenue is from property tax. This is not enough to cover the cost of providing EMS and other services. This issue must be fixed for the future of these districts.

The fire service is the first line response in every Oregon community, answering every call for emergency service. A significant number of calls are for social issues established previously, yet the fire service does not receive funding for the additional call volume.

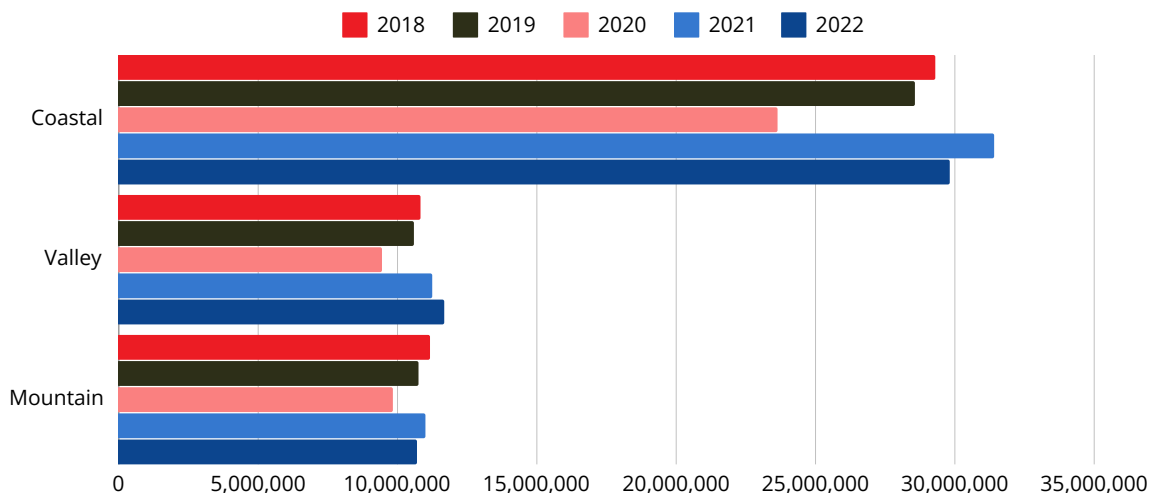
Some areas of Oregon receive large amounts of visitors and tourists, but fire agencies receive no extra funding to cover the costs of emergency response, putting a toll on the local fire service and the community they're paid to protect. State lands are not taxable yet carry a significantly large response burden.

Oregon State Parks experienced another record-breaking year for visitors in 2023 with more than 52.2 million day-use visitors, just behind 2021's historic high of 53 million. For overnight camping, the system saw 2.9 million camper nights (McDonald, 2023).



Silver Falls State Park is expecting 2.1 million visitors this year, adding a large service component to a small fire agency. The same issue exists on federal and Bureau of Land Management lands.

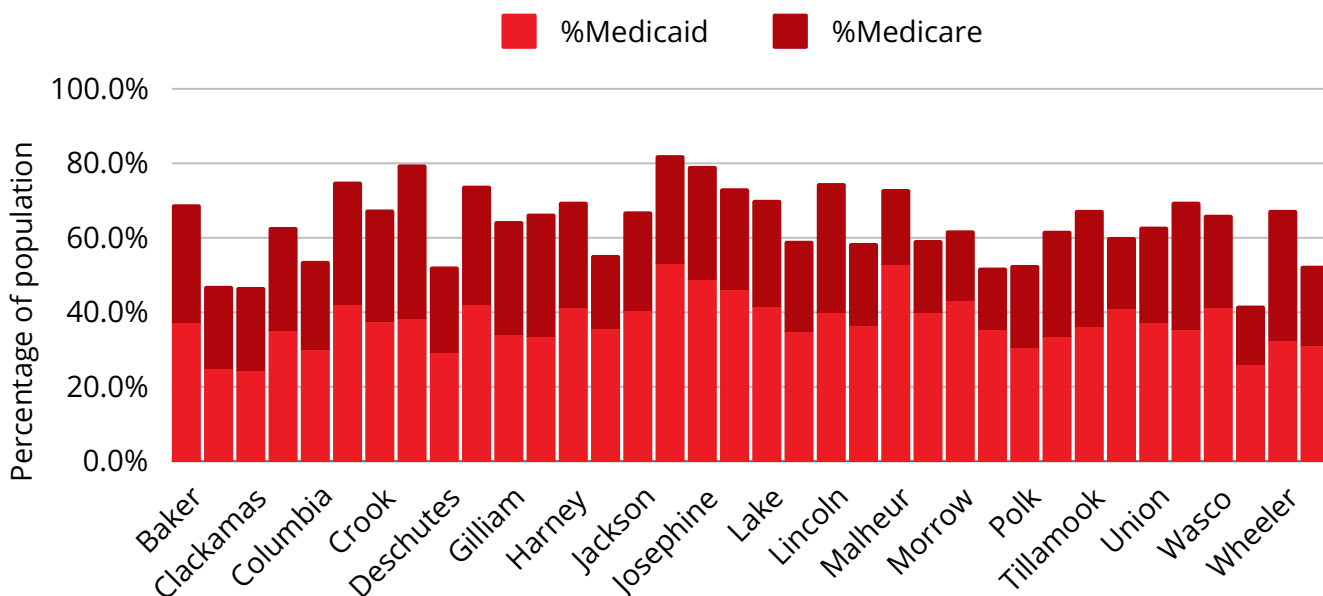
VISITORS TO OREGON STATE PARKS BY REGION



Data provided by the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department

Many of the patients the fire service responds to are on Medicare or Medicaid that provide a low reimbursement rate. Oregon’s ambulance service is covered by fire departments and special districts to most of its community members. Stable and predictable funding from our partners in an overall healthcare funding approach must be provided. Community care organizations, hospitals, public health agencies, and community service partners must be collectively engaged in all service challenges.

MEDICAID & MEDICARE REIMBURSEMENT

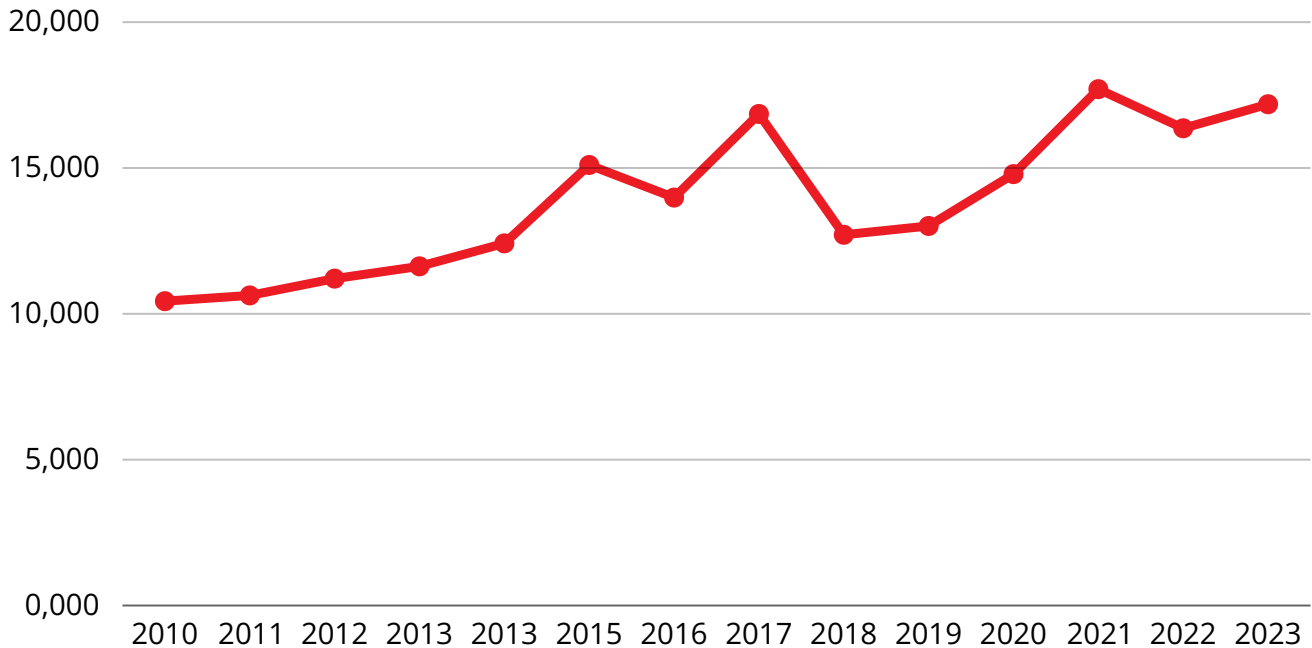


Oregon Office of Rural Health, 5.16.2024
 Medicaid/OHP eligibles from OHA, April 2024, Medicare is from CMS enrollment data, October 2023
 Data provided by the OSFM's Analytics & Intelligence Unit

EMS and fire calls are rising. Fire calls require a much larger system response including both number of staff and time. For example, responding to a single-family house fire requires 15 firefighters while most EMS responses involve two firefighters, one typically a paramedic.

Another issue impacting funding for fire agencies are measures 5 (1990) and 50 (1997). Measure 5 introduced a limit to the total level of taxes local governments and school districts could levy. Measure 50 limited the annual growth rate of property taxes to no more than three percent. These impact the ability for local fire agencies to meet demands for service and afford increasing costs of providing those services. Many agencies have been able to pass local option levies and bonds to provide limited additional funding.

REPORTED FIRE INCIDENTS IN OREGON



Data provided by the OSFM's Analytics & Intelligence Unit

FUNDING SOLUTIONS

NON-LEGISLATIVE

- The Oregon fire service must continue to focus on prevention. The downstream effects from community risk reduction in policy and investment are worthwhile. Prevention efforts save money, property, and lives.
- The fire service could explore different community response models to reduce funding strain.

LEGISLATIVE

- Explore the impacts of measures 5 and 50 and address the funding constraints on fire agencies.
- Look at funding options to provide the fire service for state lands and properties responses.
- Consider making local option levies that pass multiple times permanent to provide funding the fire service depends on.
- Approach community care organizations, insurance providers, and hospital systems for a collaborative solution for the current service and funding problems.
- Consider revising the \$10 per thousand property tax limitation that impacts all local governments.
- Implement an EMS assessment that strictly goes to fire agencies to provide for both non-transporting and transporting EMS services, including ambulance service areas.

MOVING FORWARD

The fire service has reached a breaking point. These critical issues need to be addressed for the fire service to be able to continue serving Oregonians and providing the level of service they expect and deserve.

Lack of funding, decline in career and volunteer firefighters, increasing calls, Oregon's wildfire crisis, and the new public safety crisis highlight the need for systemic change.

Oregon has an urgent need for a proactive approach to effectively address the increasing complexity and volume of calls. Despite the financial and logistical hurdles, the Oregon fire service has demonstrated resilience and ingenuity; however, sustaining and enhancing these efforts requires robust and strategic investments that require legislative action.

The conversation initiated during the Convening of the Oregon Fire Service is just the beginning. There was unanimous agreement about the value and need for ongoing collaboration. Continuous dialogue, sharing best practices, and advocating for comprehensive policy and funding reforms will help the Oregon fire service to evolve to meet the demands of today and in the future.

To ensure the safety and well-being of Oregon's communities, action must be taken. The findings and recommendations presented are a call to action for all—fire service leaders, policymakers, and community members alike.

The fire service and the safety of all Oregonians hinges on long-term investment and state-level solutions to make sure Oregonians have adequate service across the state.

Supporting a resilient and responsive fire service ensures it meets today's challenges while also anticipating and preparing for those of tomorrow.



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*A fire incident is considered to likely involve an under-sheltered encampment when the NFIRS Incident Type is entered a "1120" (Tent Fire/Undersheltered) or "112" (fire in a structure other than a building) with the Structure Type is listed as "Tent".



This report is a product of the Oregon fire service and is endorsed by the
OREGON GOVERNOR'S FIRE SERVICE POLICY COUNCIL