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Oregon Rural Emergency Services Suffer From Lack Of Volunteers

by **Kristian Foden-Vencil** Follow OPB Feb. 22, 2018 2:57 p.m. | Updated: Feb. 27, 2018 1 p.m. | Detroit, Ore.

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When you call 911 for an emergency, you expect help to arrive quickly.

In populated counties like Multnomah or Clackamas, emergency services contract to respond in something like six minutes or less — 90 percent of the time.



The Idanha Detroit Fire District has four volunteers and four full-time fire fighters. But in October, the federal grants that pay for those full-time fire fighters, ends.

Kristian Foden-Vencil/OPB

But in rural Oregon, emergency response can take much longer.

Take Detroit, a tiny town on the banks of Detroit Lake, in the Santiam State Forest.

Detroit's year-round population amounts to about 500 people, and that's including the adjacent communities of Idanha and Breitenbush.

But in the summer, that population can swell by a factor of 25 with boaters and campers. That's 12,500 people, or the equivalent of Sandy or Gladstone.

So who answers the call when someone gets hurt?

At 66, Linda Stice has a head full of white hair and glasses — and she's the first responder for accidents around Detroit.

“My husband and I both volunteered to just be of some use in our later years,” said Stice, who used to make silicon wafers in Salem but retired to Detroit a few years ago. “I love doing it.”



At 66, Linda Stice volunteers for the Idanha Detroit Fire District. Many retirees act as the first line of defense in an emergency in rural Oregon.

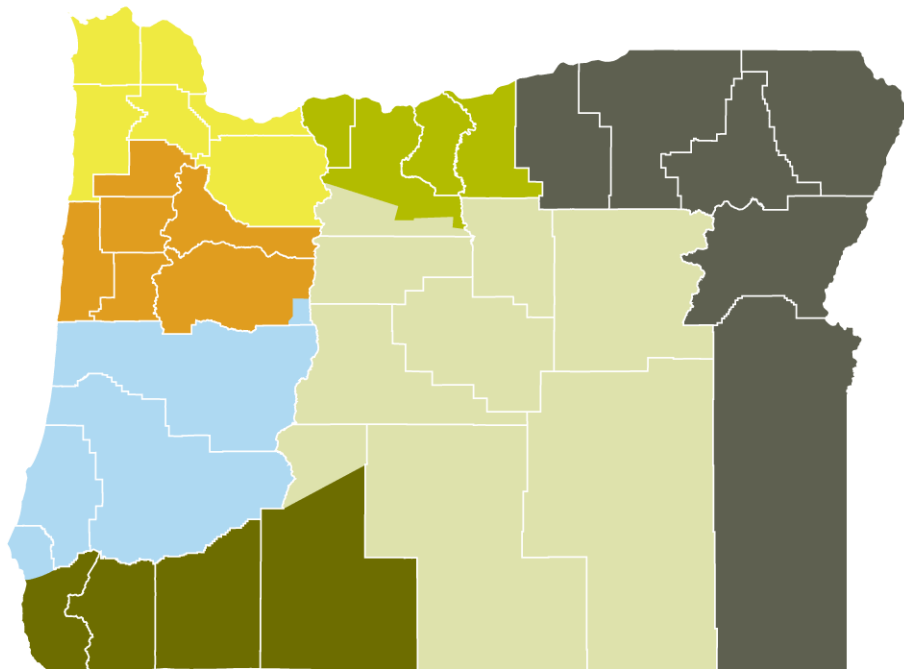
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“It makes me feel like maybe my obituary is going to say something other than, ‘She lived. She died.’”

Stice jumps into action when she hears her pager, whether it goes off in the middle of dinner or the middle of the night. But neither Linda Stice nor her husband, Leon, are professional paramedics or fire fighters. Linda is only allowed to provide limited first aid and fight a fire from outside a building. Leon drives the fire department’s GMC truck.

Emergency Response Areas

Oregon’s emergency response systems are split into seven areas, numbered 1 to 9 for some undecipherable reason lost to time.



Emergency Response Times

January 23, 2011

The national standard for emergency response to arrive on scene is 6 minutes. No areas in Oregon meet that standard. Time data below in minutes.

Area 2		9.12
Area 1		9.2
Area 3		13.96
Area 6		14.55
Area 9		14.76
Area 5		15.56
Area 7		19.48
Statewide Average		10.92

This fire district has two other volunteers and four full-time fire fighters. But after this summer, the federal [FEMA SAFER](#) grant that pays for those full-timers ends.

Jack Krill, the recently departed fire chief of Idanha Detroit Rural Fire Department, worries about what that means.

“Up until about three years ago, we were scratching half our calls, basically. We weren’t responding,” he said.

There’s still nobody to answer the call sometimes. When that happens, dispatchers call on the next closest service — a half-hour drive down the mountain in Gates.

Krill says Detroit is more responsive now that Linda and Leon Stice are volunteering. But they still don’t have all the tools you might expect at a fire station, such as the Jaws of Life.

“Gates Fire Department is the closest extraction unit that can cut somebody out of a car. So if there’s a crash at mile 76, there could be an hour before we can really access a patient or really get them out of a vehicle,” he said.



Former Fire Chief Jack Krill worries about the lack of volunteers for rural fire departments.

Kristian Foden-Vencil/OPB

The truth is, the nation’s rural ambulance services are a little odd.

In bigger cities such as Eugene or Salem, local government contracts with professional ambulance services.

But in small towns, ambulance crews were cobbled together by locals back in the 1950s and ‘60s. Some of those services are nonprofits. Others started small, but were assimilated into the local fire department and others were taken over by the local hospital.

But many still rely on volunteers.

Robert Duehmig with the [Oregon Office of Rural Health](#) said it’s not just rural populations that suffer as the number of volunteers drop.

“I think a lot of people in Oregon really cherish the opportunity to go out to rural Oregon, to go to the mountains, to go for a hike,” he said. “But I

don't think many realize that if they called 911 out there for an emergency, it could take quite some time for somebody to respond."

Duehmig said people just aren't volunteering like they once did.

"It can be a bit of a challenge getting younger people to volunteer," he said. "It takes the time away from your family and from work in order to go get your EMT license."



Many rural fire departments are in need of more volunteers.

Kristian Foden-Vencil/OPB

It can take two semesters and \$2,000 to become an emergency medical technician. So it's cheaper and easier to volunteer for the local school or church.

Dana Selover, the director of [Oregon's EMS and Trauma Department](#), said the state is trying to help rural communities that rely on volunteers by providing a mobile training unit, educational opportunities and new equipment for rural emergency departments.

The state is also trying to modernize ambulance services using big data. Under a new law, the state will start collecting data next January on all ambulance patients.

That promises all kinds of changes. For example, for the first time the state will know how many patients get graded against a “stroke scale” on the way to the hospital. A stroke scale helps determine whether a patient is having a stroke and how serious it is.

Oregon EMS program manager Candace Toyama said new data is likely to change everything from how emergency service responders are trained to what kind of equipment is put into ambulances.

“How could I possibly know how well my people are doing unless I can pull the data?” she said.

The hope is having more information could speed up rural response times.