

ADDRESSING THE NEED:

Best Practices in Implementing High School EMS Programs

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History

In the past decade, numerous published reports have made it clear that public Emergency Medical Services (EMS) resources will continue to be strained by an ever-increasing demand for licensed EMS professionals¹. In 2015 in an effort to be proactive and address the personnel shortage, the Louisiana Bureau of EMS (LaBEMS), in partnership with the Louisiana Department of Education, introduced the EMS Pathway as part of the Louisiana Department of Education's (LDOE) Jump Start Initiative. Jump Start is Louisiana's innovative career and technical education (CTE) program that prepares students to lead productive adult lives, capable of continuing their education after high school while earning certifications in high-wage career sectors.

After four years, the Louisiana EMS High School Pathway has grown from a handful of independent high school programs in 2015 to over 110 approved high school EMR programs and 11 EMT programs in 2019, accounting for nearly one-third of the high schools in the state. At the conclusion of the 2018-2019 academic year, over 2000 high school students had successfully earned a state-issued Emergency Medical Responder (EMR) license. As of June 1, 2019, 97 high school students had successfully completed the required Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) coursework and were in the process of earning National Registry of Emergency Medical Technicians (NREMT) certification. Over the past two years, five of the high school students who have earned a state EMT license have begun employment as EMTs immediately following graduation from high school.

The following information is a compilation of best practices and lessons learned over the four years of the EMS JumpStart program.

Preparation

As with all things related to EMS, preparation is the key to success. Prior to 2015, a handful of high schools had approached the Bureau of EMS, received approval to offer an EMR or an EMT course, and were approved as education programs. These programs were registered with the state and handled in the same manner as all other approved education programs with little attention to their unique status

¹ Bureau of Labor Statistics. (n.d.) EMTs and Paramedics. *Occupational Outlook Handbook*. Retrieved July 25, 2017 from www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/emts-and-paramedics.htm.

as high schools. It was evident early on that; the high school programs would need unique direction and guidance in order to be effective at developing competent practitioners.

Identify the Need & the Target Audience

There exists a national shortage, and this is the case in Louisiana. While many state-approved agencies are providing EMS education to help fill the gap, there is a particular need for EMS education in the rural areas of the state. Existing rural high schools serve as a great opportunity to provide training in the rural areas of the state.

In addition, to identifying locations, preparation was taken to address the needs of various services. In Louisiana, the benefit of high school EMS programs could potentially provide licensed personnel to three key sectors: rural ambulance agencies, fire departments, and industry. While most metropolitan EMS agencies choose not to hire employees under the age of 21 for insurance purposes, many of the rural EMS agencies will hire individuals over the age of 18. Many fire departments across the state of Louisiana are willing to hire firefighters at age 18, but already having a state license in EMS; JumpStart graduates have an advantage in the hiring process. A large part of Louisiana's economy is based upon the petroleum industry. Numerous refineries and plants line the gulf coast and most require plant personnel to have a minimum of an EMR license. Students graduating high school with an EMS license are prime candidates for hiring. Over the past two years, Acadian Ambulance, the largest EMS provider in the state, hired upon graduation five high schools students who successfully completed an EMT program, completed NREMT certification, and received a state EMS license.

Develop Incentives

In order to generate interest, provide opportunity, and engage stakeholders, LaBEMS and LDOE identified incentives for both the schools and the students. By including the EMS pathway within the LDOE Jump Start initiative, participating schools were able to receive additional credit toward their state School Performance School (SPS), commonly referred to as a "school report card", for the successful licensing of students. To encourage student participation, students who affiliated with an approved high school program were eligible to receive a state EMR license at no cost.

Target Schools

While every high school in Louisiana was presented the opportunity to consider offering an EMS education program, certain schools have emerged as having developed stronger programs. The strongest EMR programs tend to exist at the schools with a diverse population that has a significant population of students looking for alternatives to a traditional college prep curriculum. The more successful high school EMT programs tend to exist at schools that are middle class and again have students looking for post-secondary education alternatives. The actual locations of schools offering EMR/EMT (i.e. rural, metro) does not appear to have a large impact on program success. Most schools with strong academic records and a strong emphasis on college prep have not shown much interest in the Jump Start program. It is important to note that a large factor of high school program success is access to resources: financial, experiential, and educational.

Partner with DOE

The ongoing partnership between LaBEMS and LDOE has been a vital component of the success of the EMS pathway. This partnership has allowed for policy collaboration, appropriate development of incentives, and support of quality programs.

Implementation

High School EMS Guidance

Prior to 2015, high school EMS programs were permitted to operate within the approved state guidelines for all EMS education programs. With the focused effort of 2015, LaBEMS amended the requirements for high school programs and instructors to allow for a stronger and more robust EMS high school program within the LDOE Jump Start initiative. For the first two years, despite existing policies, it was soon determined that greater and more focused efforts for the high school programs would be needed, due to personnel changes, inconsistent policy enforcement, and the unexpectedly rapid growth of the programs.

In the spring of 2018, LaBEMS initiated a concerted effort to provide direct guidance to the high schools. The Bureau of EMS convened a high school advisory task force comprised of EMS instructors and representatives from LDOE and LaBEMS. The primary goal of the task force was to develop a High School EMS Guidance² document. Teachers were selected from identified high-quality EMS high school programs. The primary goal of the High School EMS Guidance document was to ensure consistent, high quality, programs that develop competent practitioners (licensed) upon program completion.

The advisory committee met several times to develop, review, and revise the guidance document. The state EMS Task Force then reviewed the document. The Bureau of Emergency Medical Services Certification Commission formally adopted it on May 16, 2018, and enacted effective July 1, 2018. The document was published to the LaBEMS website, LaBEMS social media, and emailed to high schools EMS instructors of record. In addition, the LDOE disseminated the guidance to all district CTE directors, and their training partner, the National EMS Academy (NEMSA) disseminated the guidance to all high school teachers they had trained.

The guidance was well received by a majority of the stakeholders. Reviewed annually, it serves as the primary reference guide for the high school programs.

Super Summer Program

With the launch of the EMS Jump Start pathway, the LDOE partnered with NEMSA to provide summer training, both for initial training and refreshers for high school teachers. This program is known as Super Summer.

Super Summer is held annually with initial training taking place one week and the refresher session taking place during a second week. The Bureau of EMS coordinates with NEMSA to ensure appropriate training and instructor exams to achieve state licensure; and LABEMS presents one day during the training providing information on state policy, procedures, and protocol.

The greatest benefit to Super Summer lies in the opportunity for high school instructors to meet and address questions or concerns directly with LaBEMS representatives. With over 100 high school programs and hundreds of private and municipal EMS education agencies, LABEMS availability is often limited to contact by email or telephone.

² Louisiana Bureau of EMS. (2018) High School EMS Education Program Manual - 2018. Available at <http://ldh.la.gov/assets/oph/ems/2018/HighSchoolEMSEducationProgramGuide.pdf>.

Appropriate Staffing

In January 2018, LaBEMS hired John Cavell, a former school and district administrator, as Education Manager. With limited knowledge of EMS, Cavell was able to leverage his experience in education to assist in developing quality programs. His knowledge of federal and state education policy, along with best practices in schools, has allowed for the development of improved protocols and better assistance to schools.

Monitor & Quality Assurance

With the launch of the EMS Jump Start pathway, there were bound to be some unforeseen issues. The vast majority of these issues that have arisen lie in the fact that high schools are not practicing EMS agencies. High schools, while well-intentioned, may not always feel the need to be fully compliant with state statutes. In some cases, this may have been negligent, but more often than not, it was due to ignorance or complacency. To ensure compliance, LaBEMS monitors high schools both digitally in the state Information Management System (IMS) and in person via site visits and scholastic audits.

One such issue arose regarding the requirements of Medical Directors. Louisiana law (R.S. 40:1133.1) requires that all EMS instruction be performed under the supervision of a Medical Director (M.D. or D.O.). With the promulgation of the state High School EMS Program Guidance, LaBEMS discovered that many high school and districts were not compliant with this policy. As a result, LaBEMS required an active role for the Medical Director in the IMS. This required high schools that were out of compliance to pursue a Medical Director before they could register their course and agency in the IMS.

In addition, to allow passive monitoring of programs, the IMS required uploaded documents (i.e. course syllabus, evaluation forms).

Another effort to ensure quality instruction was the implementation of a requirement that all instructors must maintain NREMT certification and state licensure. This policy required many instructors to earn a certification that was not required previously. While some schools requested to be grandfathered in, the decision was made that all instructors must earn NREMT certification. However, in order to give all teachers time to comply, LaBEMS provided instructors the time until they had to renew their state license to be compliant. To earn NREMT certification, teachers must actively prepare for the exam. This simple requirement has already proven beneficial, as previous EMS instructors that were not fully committed to a quality program, have opted to pursue other opportunities instead of pursuing NREMT certification. Most of these schools have replaced their instructors with high-quality, engaged instructors.

Anticipate Problems

With so many programs to monitor, spread across the entire state, a pro-active approach to program administration is required. The Bureau of EMS actively monitors program compliance via the IMS. Inconsistent reports, above average phone calls, and reports from teachers may indicate problem areas that may need to be addressed. Areas of particular focus have included:

- programs operating without a Medical Director,
- programs operating without credentialed instructors,
- instructors feeling pressured by administration to pass and license students,
- class size is too large, and
- passing and licensing students who have not demonstrated competency.

Lessons Learned

Motivation

One of the most powerful lessons learned since the implementation of the EMS Jump State pathway has been the impact on programs by the misplaced motivation of teachers and schools.

Early on, many schools began looking to implement the EMS pathway but sought to do so only within the existing resources of the school. Several schools decided to offer the course and use it to justify the placement of athletic coaches into faculty positions. While many coaches do a great job of teaching EMS courses, those individuals hired strictly as coaches, not as teachers, often found themselves teaching courses they had little interest in teaching. Recognizing the ability of some programs to offer courses without a qualified and engaged instructor, LaBEMS decided to implement the aforementioned NREMT certification requirement.

In addition to poor instructors, some schools saw the EMS pathway as an “easy” and “cheap” method to increase their SPS. While the benefit of points toward a school’s SPS was a deliberate attempt to encourage schools to participate, some school administrators tried to take advantage of this opportunity. In these cases, the schools sought to pass and license as many students as possible in a “license-mill” fashion.

The Bureau of EMS easily identified many of the schools attempting to “mill” licenses by the large number of students affiliated with that school in the IMS. Once identified, these schools were subjected to scrutiny by the LaBEMS office to ensure quality and student competency. These schools may be subjected to site visits or scholastic audits. With the promulgation of the High School EMS Program Guidance, most administrators recognize the expectations for licensure and ensure compliance.

Despite the guidance from the state, some school administrators still relied upon the EMS pathway for increases in their SPS. This created difficulty for some instructors who felt pressured by school administrators to license students who the instructor did not feel was competent. In most cases, teachers who contacted LaBEMS with their concerns initiated a response from LaBEMS. In some cases, schools were contacted directly and the concerns were discussed. In a few cases, site visits, scholastic audits, or corrective actions were taken. Sadly, a few teachers who dealt with difficult administrators subsequently resigned instead of licensing incompetent students. In extreme cases, LaBEMS has shared information with the LDOE for review and potential school-wide scholastic audits.

Relatedly, some school administrators did not feel these programs offered value to their school, but only offered them because they were required to. In these cases, it was common to see EMS courses were overcrowded or used as a “holding” class for students with a record of poor academic performance. These actions often frustrated teachers as their ability to offer quality instruction were severely hampered.

Teacher Turnover

Despite the best efforts of schools, teacher turnover is very high in Louisiana, hovering around 12% annually³. This requires annual training for new hires. It also requires additional preparation on the part of LaBEMS to ensure proper training and policy compliance. It is also possible for some schools to lose a

³ Louisiana Department of Education. (2018) 2017-2018 Educator Workforce Report.

teacher mid-year; unfortunately, there is not a pool of teachers readily available. Without an extraordinary effort to identify a qualified instructor, the school may find itself in a situation where they are not able to license students.

Lack of Professional Support

While the high school EMS program was designed and intended to provide additional licensed practitioners to a field already stretched thin, some licensed personnel have voiced displeasure about the program.

Some experienced EMS professionals question the licensing of high school students. In some case, they question maturity and lack of life-experience of high school students. The Bureau of EMS considers this argument as invalid because an employer should decide questions of maturity and experience. Once a student has successfully completed a valid EMS course and demonstrated competency, the state has no reservation for licensing.

Another concern voiced by some is the lack of EMS field experience by high school instructors. The vast majority of high school EMS instructors are certified teachers, not EMS practitioners. The Bureau of EMS is not concerned with the field experience of EMR instructors because they have met the standards put forth by both LaBEMS and NREMT to earn licensure and certification. High school EMT programs are strongly encouraged to hire instructors with experience in EMS, and most programs have accepted that recommendation.

Conclusion

Louisiana, like the rest of the nation, faces a shortage of licensed practitioners. To help alleviate the strain, LaBEMS and LDOE have partnered to develop an innovative program. The High School EMS Jump Start pathway is actively addressing the shortage of qualified personnel. Four years in, thousands of licensed EMRs and dozens of licensed EMTs are now available. While not every high school EMS graduate may pursue a career in EMS, many are now considering EMS as a viable option that exists immediately after graduating high school.