



Watertown City Council

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ELECTED
OFFICIALS:

Mark S. Sideris,
Council President

Vincent J. Piccirilli, Jr.,
Vice President &
District C Councilor

John M. Airasian,
Councilor At Large

Caroline Bays,
Councilor At Large

John G. Gannon,
Councilor At Large

Anthony Palomba,
Councilor At Large

Nicole Gardner,
District A Councilor

Lisa J. Feltner,
District B Councilor

Emily Izzo,
District D Councilor

Committee of the Budget and Fiscal Oversight Meeting March 6, 2025 Report March 25, 2025

The Committee convened on Thursday, March 6, at 6:00 pm in the Louis P. Andrews Upper Conference Room, with remote participation by zoom.

Present were Vincent Piccirilli, Chair; Emily Izzo, Vice Chair and Nicole Gardner, Secretary. Staff present were City Manager George Proakis, Fire Chief Ryan Nicholson, Lieutenant David Meagher, Captain Paul LaFauci, Auditor Megan Langan, Treasurer/Collector Melissa Morrissey, Assistant City Manager for Finance Ari Sky, and, by zoom, DPW Director of Finance and Administration Michael Albano. Also attending were residents David Gardner in person, and Angie Kornelis by zoom.

Councilor Piccirilli called the meeting to order at 6pm. The purpose of the meeting was to make recommendations on the cost and benefits of a second ambulance for the Watertown Fire Department.

Mr. Proakis began by highlighting the importance of discussing the potential addition of a second ambulance to the Watertown Fire Department. He emphasized the need to hear directly from the fire department about the costs and benefits of this proposal as the city looks ahead to future years.

Chief Nicholson provided a detailed presentation on the status of Emergency Medical Services (EMS) in Watertown and the need for a second Advanced Life Support (ALS) ambulance (see Attachment).

The key issues the department is facing are:

1. The goal of improving response times.
2. The city's EMS resources are stretched thin.
3. The city is losing ambulance revenue to outside agencies.

Key points from the presentation are:

1. The Watertown Fire Department has been staffing a Basic Life Support (BLS) ambulance since 1975. All firefighters are licensed at the EMT Basic level.
2. The department currently operates with 16 paramedics and upgraded to ALS service in 2017. The current ALS ambulance is stationed at the North Station.
3. Pro EMS in Cambridge is Watertown's backup ambulance provider, and the City signed a 3 year contract with Pro EMS in January 2025. Neighboring communities also provide ambulances at times, as part of a mutual aid commitment.
4. In 2024, the department handled nearly 4,400 ambulance calls, with about one-third of these handled by outside providers (Pro EMS and neighboring towns).

5. The revenue from transports has steadily increased, reaching around \$1.5 million in FY24, with a current collection rate of 71% for the fiscal year.
6. The department's average response time is around the 5-minute mark, while outside agencies have seen response times that exceed the National Fire Protection Association standard of 9 minutes.

Regarding revenue, the Chief explained that revenue per transport is about \$690, and the number of calls and transports are the primary revenue drivers. Pro EMS billing rates are similar to Watertown's.

Regarding response times, National Fire Protection Association standards require emergency medical services to respond within 9 minutes 90% of the time. He noted that Watertown Fire Department's response rate was 96% within this timeframe, whereas outside ambulances only met the 9-minute standard 44% of the time. This is because Pro EMS ambulances primarily come from Cambridge, increasing their response time. Also if they cannot respond to a call, they are responsible for finding an alternative ambulance service, which takes additional time. This results in longer response times, which is especially concerning in critical medical emergencies, where every minute counts.

The Chief then proposed adding eight new firefighter positions, two per shift, to enable the department to staff a second Advanced Life Support ambulance, enhancing the department's ability to meet response standards. The estimated net cost of the 8 positions is about \$855,000. Assuming a conservatively estimated additional revenue to the Department of \$400,000, the net cost to the City would be \$455,000 in the first year. The Chief confirmed that such a change would not require any changes in the City's collective bargaining agreements.

The Chief stated that the Department ran a 2019 pilot program where a second ambulance was staffed with overtime, running for six months. During this time, the program responded to 83% of EMS calls with an average response time of 5.6 minutes. However, the pilot exceeded budget and was discontinued after six months.

In the ensuing discussion, the following topics were discussed, and requests for further information were made. Some data may not be readily available but need to be collected over time.

Performance & response time

1. The Committee asked for annual data on the number of calls, including breakdowns of types of calls (e.g., cardiac, trauma, etc.), and which required ALS vs. BLS.
2. The Committee asked for more detail on the response time by responder, and an analysis showing the aggregate performance data for both the Fire Department and the backup responders, so we can see if overall, the standards are being met.
3. The Committee asked for average response time for the west end of Watertown vs. other parts, since Pro EMS is responding from Cambridge.
4. The Committee asked for greater clarity on initial response time experienced by the resident, specifically, since a Watertown fire truck, with an EMT as part of the team, will respond and provide care while awaiting for transport to be provided by a backup responder if the Watertown ambulance is unavailable.
5. The Committee would like to see performance data from the 6 month pilot, to see how that differed from when the City uses backup providers.

6. The Committee would like to see the contract details and performance expectations for Pro EMS.
7. The Committee asked for a detailed breakdown of the ambulance services in surrounding communities for benchmarking purposes, including numbers of ambulances, the model they use (ALS, BLS, etc.), the backup providers used, numbers of calls, weighted average response time, and their response time agreements with their providers.

Cost and revenue data

1. The Committee asked for further detailed data on transport rates, including a breakdown of payer information across Medicare, Medicaid, and private payers, how it has changed over time, and if there are any forecasts or indicators of how they might change over the next 5 years.
2. The Committee asked for an updated placeholder estimate of benefits & pension costs to be developed for all budgeting going forward, since the current placeholder is dated, and suggested a review of actuarial calculations every two years going forward, to ensure accurate budgeting.
3. The Committee asked for projections for staffing costs over the next 5 years, since the workforce would change over time, and costs will evolve.
4. Since estimates of potential revenue ranged from \$400,000 to \$600,000 during the discussion, the Committee asked for further detailed analysis on revenue impact.
5. The Committee asked for clarification on the reimbursement rates for both Watertown, Pro EMS, and mutual aid ambulance calls, including what portions are reimbursed under programs like Medicare, what the rules are for reimbursement under Medicaid, Medicare, and private insurance, and what happens in cases of financial hardship.
6. The Committee would like to see how hardship cases are handled in billing for both Watertown and Pro services, and explore potential policies for fee waivers or other financial assistance for residents using ambulance services.
7. The Committee would like a review of the feasibility of staffing a second ambulance during peak hours rather than 24 hours a day, since demand is concentrated and this would be substantially lower in cost.

At the conclusion of the discussion, the Manager shared that there is uncertainty around the FY26 budget, currently under development. Unlike in past years, the budget is not as strong due to factors like lower new growth projections and reliance on state funds. Furthermore, the contracts for all city employees will expire in June, requiring a reserve for potential negotiations. For that reason, he is taking a cautious approach to new initiatives for FY26, focusing instead on maintaining existing services and staff. He proposed that the Fire Department and Committee continue exploring the proposal, given the value of having an additional on-site ambulance service. However, he does not see this as a possibility for FY26 given where we are in the planning cycle, and the current forecast.

The Committee voted to continue the meeting.

The meeting adjourned at 7:40 pm by unanimous vote.

The report was prepared by Councilor Gardner.

Attachment: Presentation


Staffing a Second Ambulance

WATERTOWN FIRE DEPARTMENT



Mission Statement

The mission of the Watertown Fire Department is to provide the citizens and visitors of Watertown with an effective, well-trained team of professionals to protect their lives and property through:

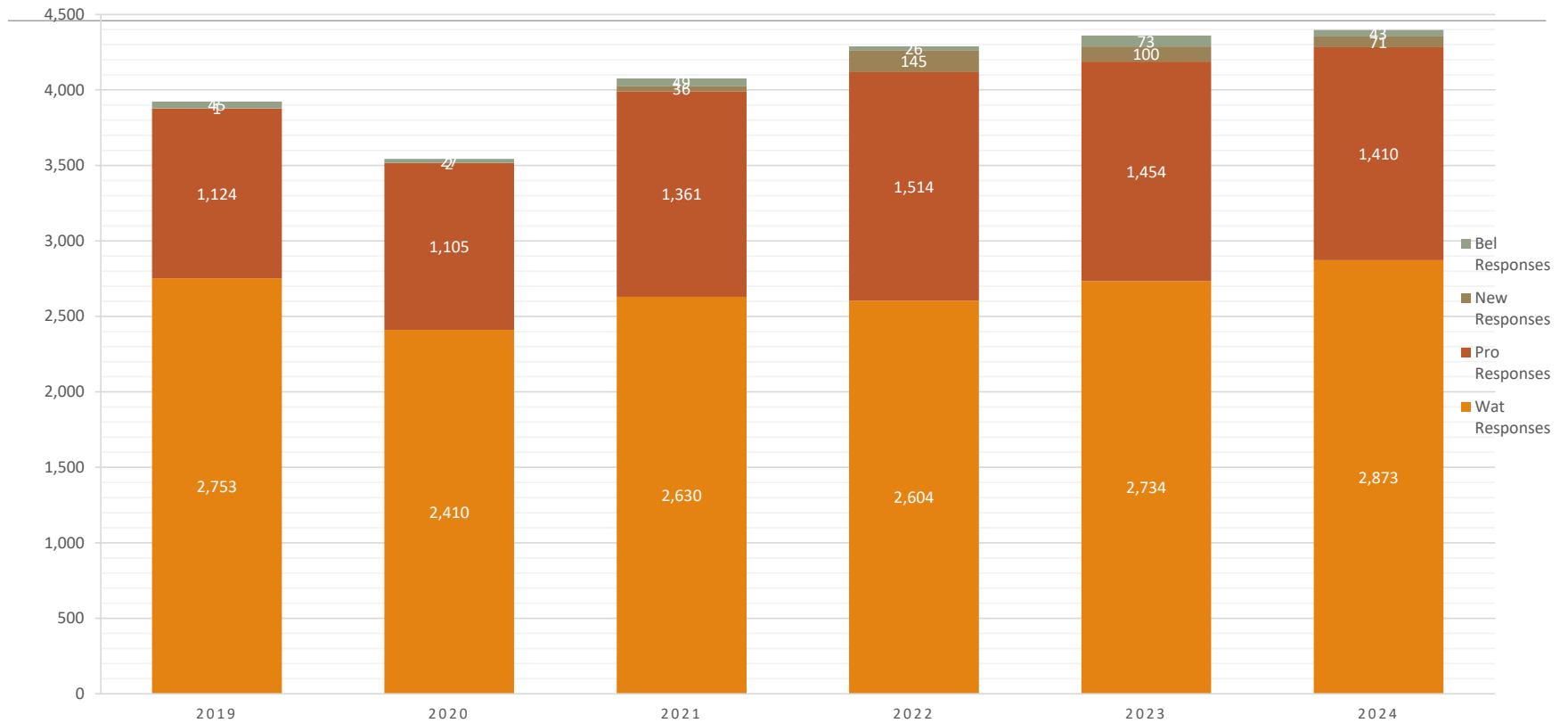
- Fire prevention and education
 - Emergency services
 - Fire suppression
 - Medical
 - Rescue
 - Emergency management
- 

Background

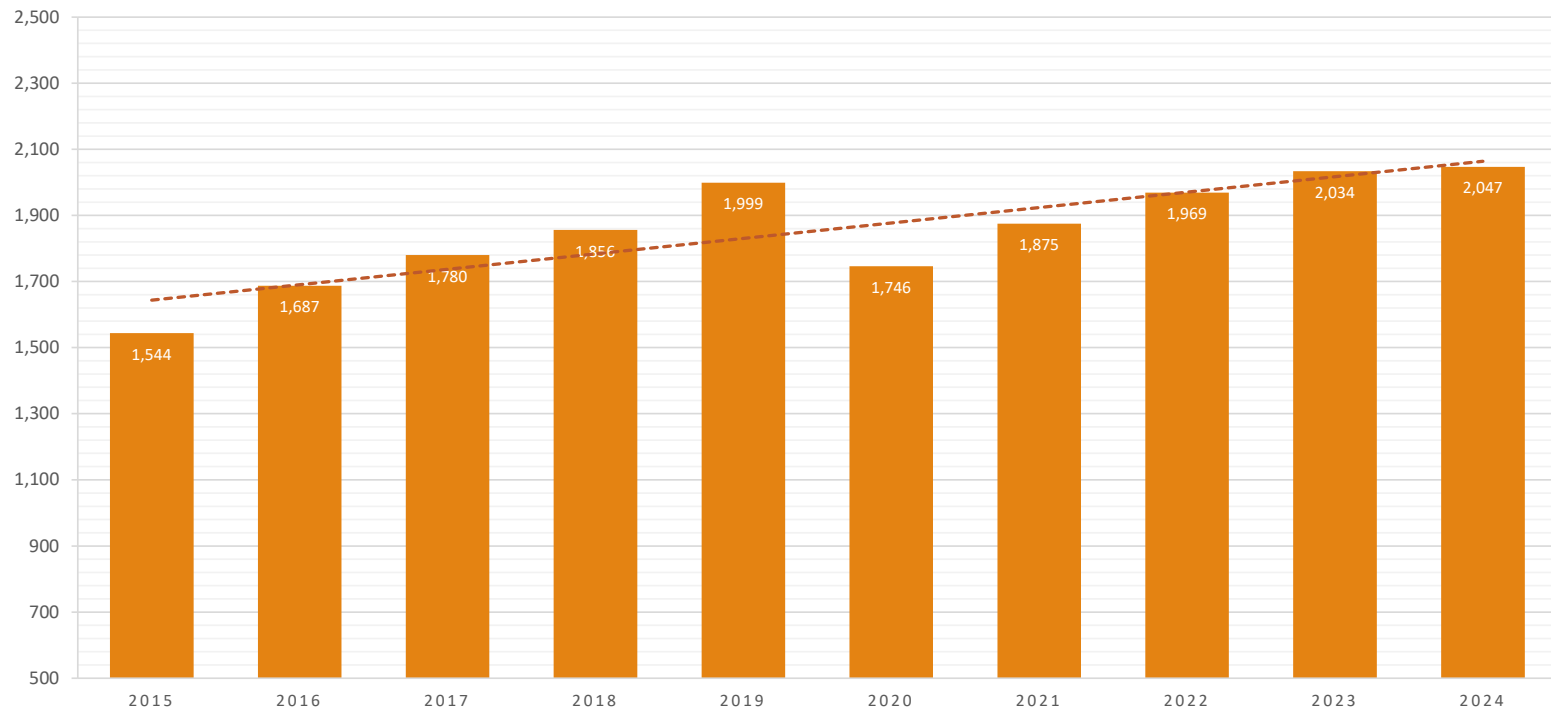
- Watertown began staffing a BLS ambulance in 1975. All Watertown firefighters are required to be trained and licensed to the EMT-Basic level.
- The City's ambulance service was upgraded to ALS in 2017. Currently, 16 firefighters are licensed to the EMT-Paramedic level.
- Medic 1 is stationed at the North Station – 270 Orchard Street.



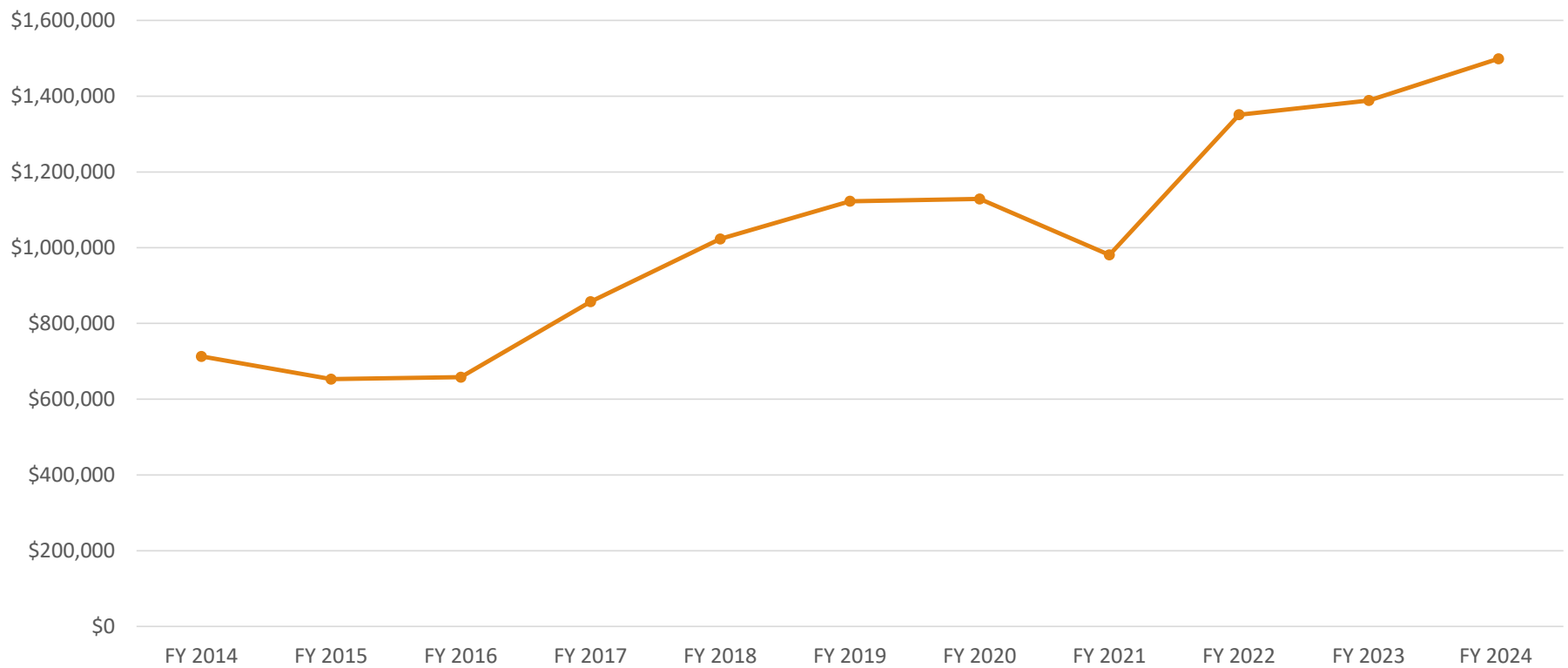
Ambulance Responses in Watertown



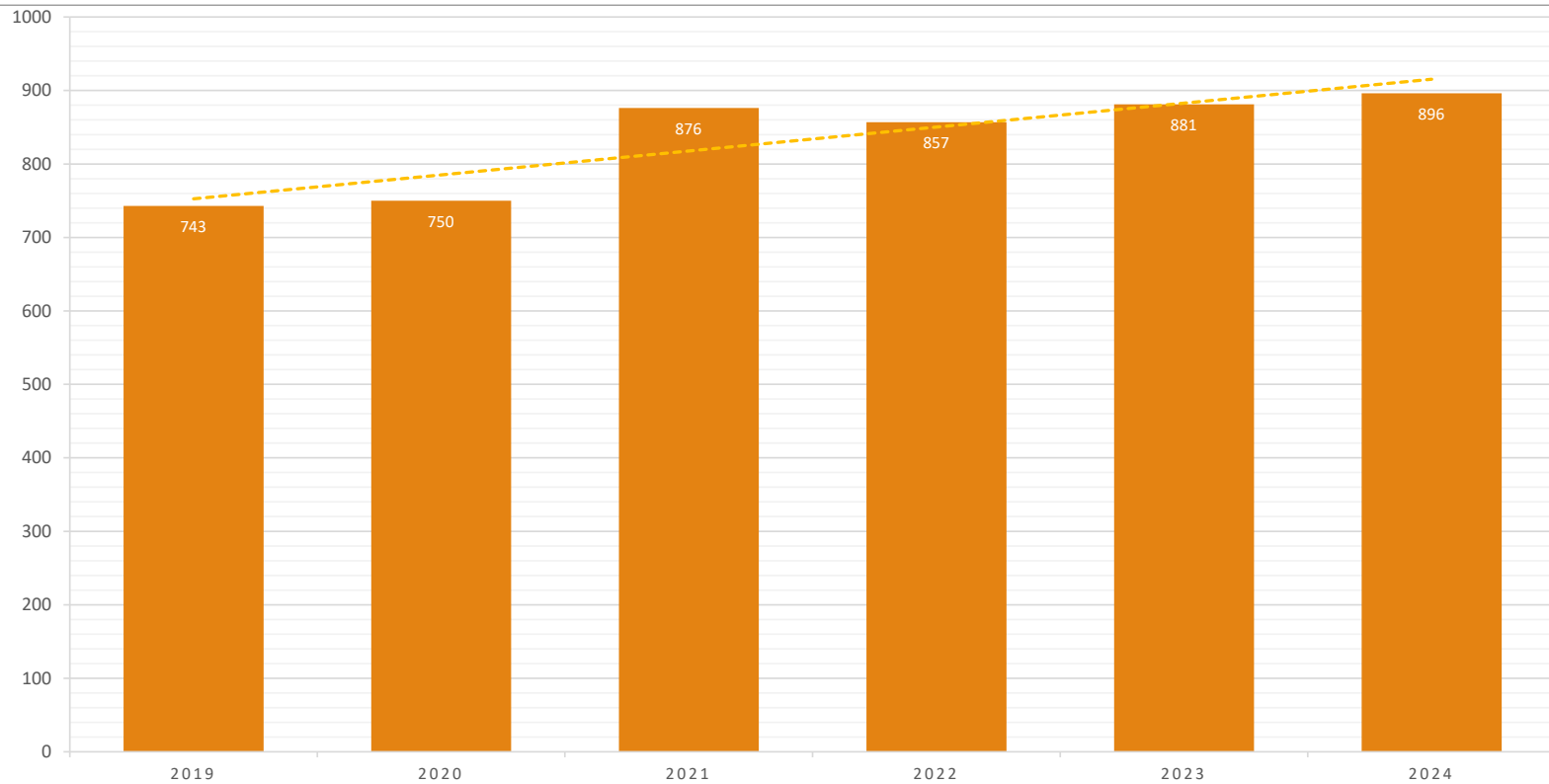
Watertown Ambulance Transports - 10 Year History



Ambulance Revenue - 10 Year History

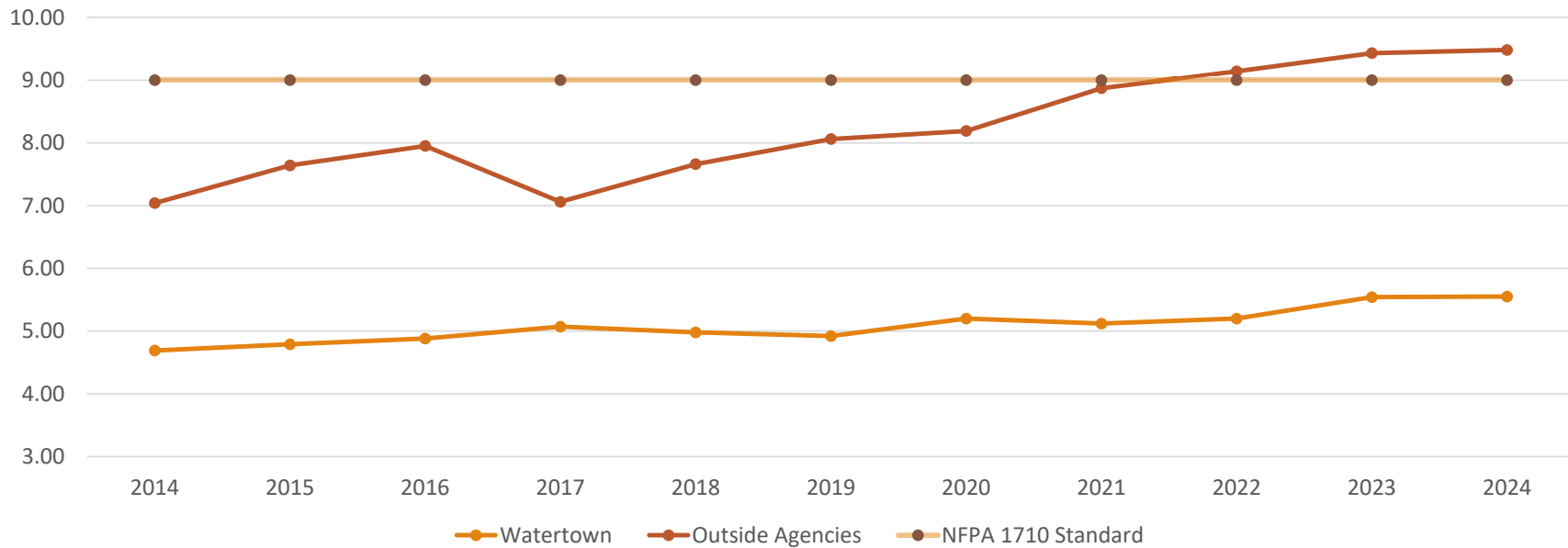


PRO-EMS Transports



Response Time

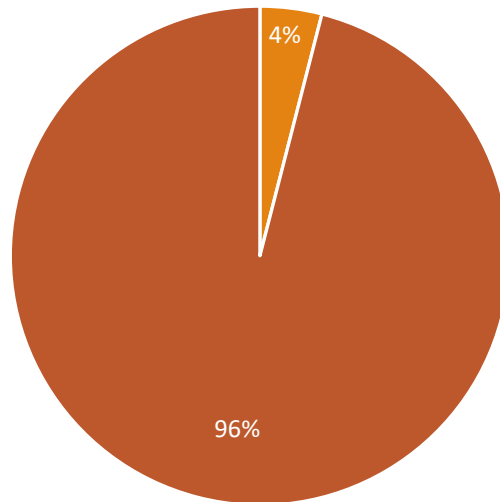
Average Response Time in Minutes



NFPA 1710 ALS Response Time Standard: Less than 540 seconds (9 minutes) total.

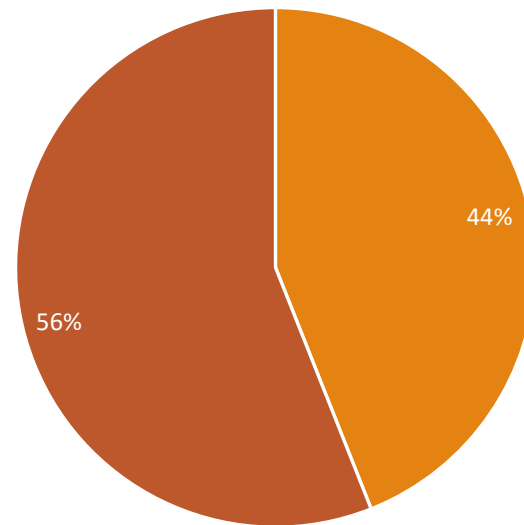
Percent of Responses Greater Than 9 Minute NFPA Standard (2019-2024)

Watertown Responses



■ Over 9 Min ■ Met Standard

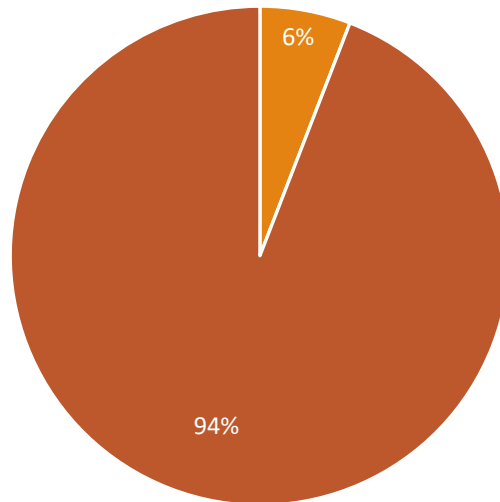
Outside Ambulance Responses



■ Over 9 Min ■ Met Standard

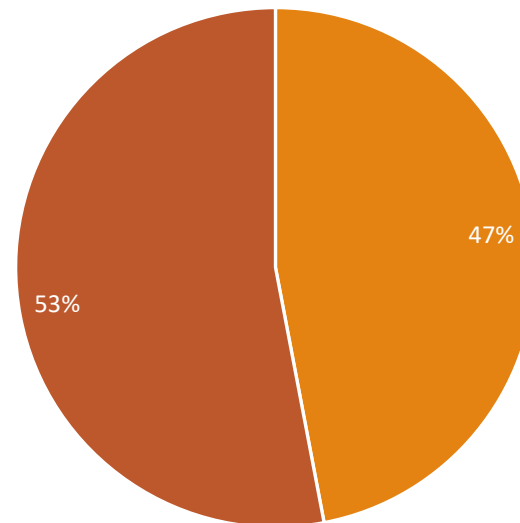
Percent of Responses Greater Than 9 Minute NFPA Standard (2023)

Watertown Responses



■ Over 9 Min ■ Met Standard

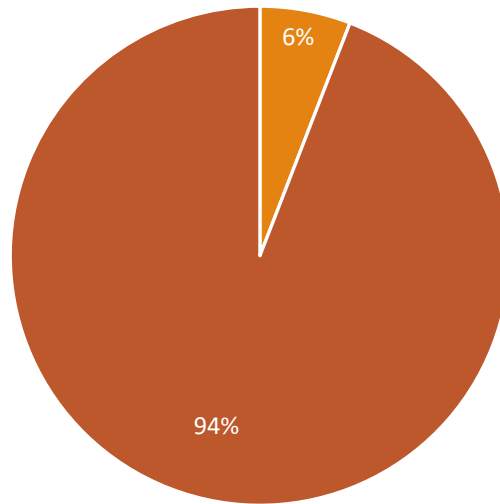
Outside Ambulance Responses



■ Over 9 Min ■ Met Standard

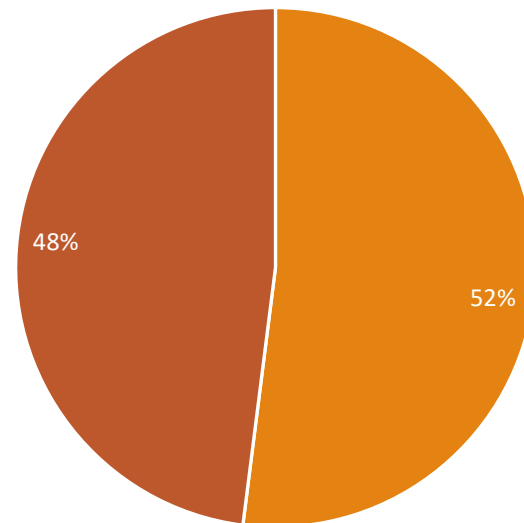
Percent of Responses Greater Than 9 Minute NFPA Standard (2024)

Watertown Responses



■ Over 9 Min ■ Met Standard

Outside Ambulance Responses

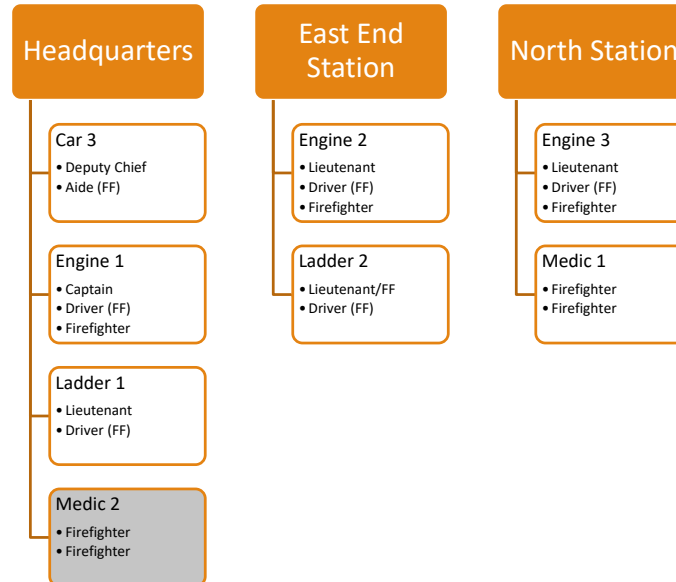


■ Over 9 Min ■ Met Standard

Staffing Proposal

- The City implemented a pilot project in 2019 which staffed a second ambulance using overtime.
 - The project was suspended after six months when overtime expenses exceeded budget.
 - During the period when the pilot was in place, City responded to 83% of EMS responses, with an average response time of 5.6 minutes.
- The enhanced staffing proposal would add 8 firefighters (2 per shift) to allow the department to staff two Paramedic/Basic (“PB”) Ambulances, 24/7.
- The additional staff would increase minimum staffing from 17 per shift to 19 per shift, bringing the system to staffing levels equivalent to 2006.

Staffing Proposal



Offsetting Revenue Potential

| | 2024 | 2023 | 2022 | 2021 | 2020 | 2019 |
|------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Transports Lost | 896 | 881 | 857 | 874 | 749 | 743 |
| Revenue Lost* | \$618,240 | \$607,890 | \$591,330 | \$603,060 | \$516,810 | \$512,670 |
| ¾ Revenue | \$463,680 | \$455,918 | \$443,498 | \$452,295 | \$387,608 | \$384,503 |

*Based on \$690/transport

Net cost would total approximately \$400,000.

Financial Considerations

| Description | Amount |
|-----------------------------------|------------------|
| Firefighter/EMT Base Pay | \$63,668 |
| Night Differential | 5,921 |
| HazMat | 1,740 |
| EMT | 9,930 |
| Holiday | 5,724 |
| <u>Benefits</u> | <u>20,000</u> |
| Expenditures per Position: | \$106,983 |
| Total Expenditures (8 positions): | \$855,864 |
| Less Additional Revenue: | (\$400,000) |
| Net Cost: | \$455,864 |