

# KANAWHA COUNTY COMMISSION

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December 29, 2021

The Honorable Jim Justice  
Governor of the State of West Virginia  
1900 Kanawha Boulevard, East  
Charleston, WV 25301

Governor Jim Justice:

I applaud your recent announcement to direct a portion of West Virginia's CARES Act funding for first responders and strengthen the state's nursing programs.

Like most areas of the state, the shortage of direct care providers is profound in the Kanawha Valley and has continued to grow under the prolonged COVID pandemic. This shortage threatens our health delivery system.

Nowhere has the simple need for more direct support staff been more evident than what ambulance providers, hospitals, and nursing homes have experienced concerning the health care workforce.

But as I am sure you are acutely aware, all healthcare providers – including nurses working on the front lines to provide care – are struggling with substantial unmet demands for direct care workers. The need within another of those front-line provider segments (our Emergency Medical Services (EMS) first responder community) brings me to write to you today.

As a County Commissioner in the state's largest county, I work closely with the Kanawha County Emergency Ambulance Authority (KCEAA), the largest of the public ambulance authorities formed pursuant to legislative action years ago.

In my 25 years as a commissioner, I have never seen the demand for EMS professionals greater and other health care providers. In my tenure, have I never noticed the pipeline that has historically turned out many of those trained professionals running at the trickle it is today. We have a workforce crisis in healthcare, and luckily you understand our situation.

The combination of fewer newly trained professionals being turned out, coupled with existing, highly experienced professionals reaching or rapidly approaching retirement age, moving to other jobs, or just vanishing from the workforce entirely, has reached a crisis point.



Data obtained from KCEAA, I believe, highlights the crisis. To fill its current staffing model with the required numbers of qualified staff to station and operate approximately 25 response trucks per shift throughout the county, KCEAA should employ 70 paramedics. Its current paramedic headcount is 52.

Squads are also facing a loss of personnel due to retirement. Of the 52 paramedics employed by KCEAA, 20% can retire now or within the next two years.

What has become very apparent to me is the current training pipeline simply will not produce anywhere close to the number of trained professionals KCEAA should hire to address the shortage of paramedics called for in its staffing pattern alone - much less having to potentially replace 20% of its current number. I should point out that it's not just paramedics; the shortage of EMTs in Kanawha and statewide is just as significant and equally concerning.

Statewide EMS workforce data supplied by DHHR's Office of Emergency Medical Services (OEMS) support my assumption that KCEAA's experience is no different than most other EMS agencies. OEMS' data shows that for the 3 years of 2019-2021, the EMS community has lost nearly 30% of its certified providers – dropping from 6,749 to 4,788 across all levels of certification. More concerning are the reductions the data reflects in the number of certified EMTs (-1,643 - almost 36%) and the number of certified Paramedics (-258 – over 15%).

Further, believing KCEAA's workforce challenges to be particularly symbolic of other large agencies in the state, I asked some of those operating within counties nearby Kanawha for their experience. Needless to say, it has been similar.

Logan Emergency Ambulance Services Authority (LEASA), like KCEAA, a statutory public authority, is currently faced with a shortage of 6 full-time paramedics and 2 full-time EMTs. Alarmingly, LEASA has lost over 40 paramedics and EMTs in the past two years.

I also obtained information from Jan-Care Ambulance Services, the state's largest EMS provider. As of last week, the company had 100 vacancies it was struggling to fill across all levels of EMS certification, including paramedics, EMTs, and others. Like KCEAA, Jan-Care has a substantial in-house education and training program that has turned out hundreds of trained professionals over the years.

It is clear from these examples that, as you announced concerning the nursing shortage, a similar dedicated source of funding directed toward strengthening the programs historically relied on to provide EMS workers is desperately needed, and we hope the first responder allocation of CARES money will assist in that effort. Without it, I fear that the inability to find, hire, and retain trained EMS professionals places the entire statewide emergency response system at increased risk. This is no different than the struggle our hospitals and others are facing.

Governor, you are one of the first Governors in West Virginia's history to take concrete steps to deal with the medical workforce shortage. I appreciate your leadership, and we stand ready to assist however we can.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'W. Kent Carter', with a stylized flourish extending to the right.

W. Kent Carter  
President

Handwritten signature in blue ink, possibly reading "W. H. W."