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## Funding and staffing shortages force Smiths Station Fire and Rescue to suspend ambulance service

LAUREN JOHNSON

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Smiths Station Fire and Rescue has suspended the ambulance transport service due to funding and staffing shortages.

Timothy Noordermeer,

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LAUREN JOHNSON

**S**miths Station Fire and Rescue announced that they are being forced to “suspend their ambulance transport operations indefinitely” due to lack of funding and staffing shortages.

The department said in a release that these shortages have been “exacerbated” by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Daniel Sexton, Smith Station Deputy Chief, said there was already a shortage of paramedics and EMTs before the pandemic, and the shortage has only “gotten worse.”

For the last few months, Sexton said the station has struggled to find enough personnel to operate the ambulance on a 24/7 basis.

“We are extremely disappointed that it has become necessary to suspend our emergency transport capabilities,” Smith Station Fire Chief Joe Walden said in the release. “We started our ambulance service to fill a need and save lives, and we have saved many lives.”

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Walden said he hopes they will be able to restart the service “as soon as possible,” but to be able to, they will need additional funding and staff.

“In addition to skyrocketing inflation affecting fuel, maintenance, and the medical supplies that are needed and required to operate an ambulance, we have been unable to offer basic employment benefits to our paramedics and EMT’s such as insurance, retirement and competitive salaries,” Sexton said.

“This lack of basic benefits and below-average salaries along with the fact that private ambulance agencies in neighboring counties are offering as much as \$10,000 signing bonuses has made it tough (to) retain and/or attract new employees from the finite number of EMTs and paramedics that are available in our area,” Sexton said.

“It’s very frustrating to watch the news or read the newspaper and see how literally millions of dollars are being allocated by the government to all kinds of projects that are not directly COVID-related, while front line first responders – the ones answering 911 calls – are struggling to survive financially,” said Felton Atkinson, Smiths Station Fire and Rescue board chairman, in the release.

Smiths Station Fire and Rescue said it is working with East Alabama Medical Center emergency transport service as well as others in Lee County to “minimize the impact this reduction in ambulance transport service will cause.”

The department is also going to continue to hold an advanced life support non-transport license.

Smiths Station Fire and Rescue covers approximately 72 square miles and 35,000 citizens and answers over 2,000 emergency calls each year both inside and outside the city limits of Smiths Station, according to the release.

The ambulance service was officially suspended on Saturday, but Smiths Station Fire and Rescue said it plans to create and submit a plan to the Lee County Commission to request additional funding.

The department encourages concerned citizens to contact their elected officials and ask them to support the community and to “help bring back ambulance transport service, expand our fire protection and rescue services.”



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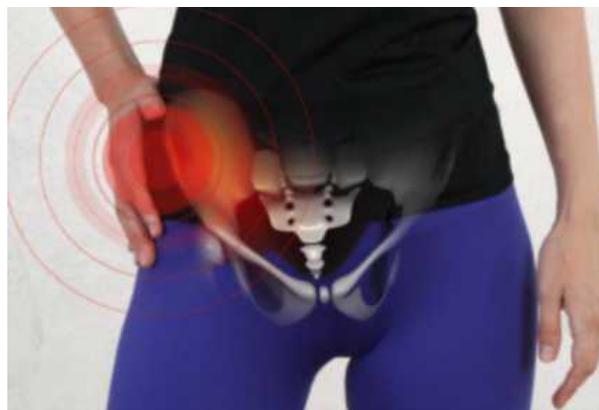
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