

## Ambulance services hurting in the Oil Patch

By: **Amy Dalrymple**, Forum News Service | Published July 19, 2013

PARSHALL — Ambulance volunteers in western North Dakota are so stressed they can't leave for a weekend because there's no one to cover for them, said the director of an Oil Patch ambulance service.

Four southwestern North Dakota ambulance services formed a nonprofit group and are seeking grant funding to hire part-time staff to fill in scheduling gaps.

"The volunteers are so active and putting in so much they really need some relief," said Lynn Hartman, administrative director for Dickinson Area Ambulance.

Emergency services in the Oil Patch were highlighted Thursday during a meeting of the Vision West Consortium in Parshall. Community leaders of 19 western North Dakota counties are working together to address challenges that come with rapid growth.

Ambulance calls have increased nearly 60 percent since 2006 in oil-impacted areas, compared with 5 percent in the rest of the state, said Tom Nehring, director of the Division of Emergency Medical Services & Trauma for the North Dakota Department of Health.

Of the 44 ambulance services in oil-producing counties, three have paid staff and the rest have volunteers or have some partially paid staff, Nehring said.

"We're putting a huge burden on the backs of the volunteers," said Nehring, adding that employers are becoming reluctant to allow staff to be on call.

Dickinson's ambulance service, which has paid staff, teamed up with volunteer departments of New England, Mott and Regent to form the nonprofit Rural EMS Assistance Inc., a pilot project to address staffing shortages.

The North Dakota Department of Health supports the public-private partnership, Nehring said.

"This is one we're watching to see if we can use and replicate this across the state," he said.

The North Dakota Legislature recently approved \$7.34 million to support rural emergency medical services across the state, \$14.5 million for fire protection districts across the state and \$1 million for local public health units.

Another \$7 million is available in energy impact grants for emergency services. But the Board of University and School Lands is reluctant to use that one-time money for staffing, which is the biggest concern for emergency services, Nehring said.

In the 2012 energy impact grant round, \$2 million was available for emergency services and communities submitted \$44 million in requests, Nehring said.