

Rural Emergency

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Rural summit covers challenges facing public safety, broadband expansion

MARSHFIELD, WI - Panelists representing local governments discussed the challenges facing the improvement of services for rural residents in an event hosted by Wisconsin Rural Partners on Wednesday, focusing on cash-strapped fire departments and how to expand broadband access.

The [2022 rural summit](#), held this week in Marshfield, aims to improve the quality of life for people in rural Wisconsin and help policymakers learn how to tackle some of the biggest challenges facing their communities.

Struggling rural fire departments

In a morning panel on public safety services, fire chiefs and local officials talked about their difficulties fighting fires, as well as responding to EMS calls, vehicle crashes and other emergencies. Volunteer forces are struggling to maintain full staffs and money is tight as municipalities run up against tax levy limits and the amount of money coming from the state government has dwindled.

“It’s sort of a quiet fact that the folks that are providing emergency services, fire and EMS, in the state of Wisconsin actually have their own emergency right now that we need to figure out how

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to address,” Mike Koles, executive director of the Wisconsin Towns Association and the panel’s moderator said. “If we are going to have vibrant communities— if you have good schools, that’s awesome; if you have great broadband, that’s awesome.”



“But if the answer to a potential person that wants to move to your community, considering your community or business, is that your response time for a heart attack is 20 minutes, 30 minutes in some places not far from here — Portage County 37 minutes — that’s not good,” he continued. “If the fire truck responds only to make sure the ashes don’t start another fire, that’s not a good response either. And we’re running into those situations in Wisconsin. So this is a huge issue, both from a public safety standpoint, but also from a community economic development standpoint.”

The fire officials said on the panel that there are partial solutions available — including mutual aid agreements with neighboring communities, the creation of larger fire districts that combine one department under several municipalities and fighting for long-term support from the state government. But none of these options can solve the long-term crunch as it becomes harder to find volunteer firefighters and more expensive to get them the equipment they need as departments are asked to answer more calls in a wide variety of emergencies.

“We’ve reached the point where doing more with less just isn’t going to happen anymore,” LaFarge Fire Chief Phil Stittleburg said. “The only thing that is going to happen with less is less.”

“We may be reaching the point of saying, I’m sorry, but we don’t respond to [carbon monoxide]

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calls anymore, we just can't do that," he continued. "Or we're not doing hazardous materials or extrication for motor vehicle crashes, we're just a fire department so we'll only come if there's a fire. Those are not things we want to do because it's just not in our nature to say no. But in all honesty, it's also unfair of us to give the public the impression we can provide a service that we're no longer equipped or trained to provide. So those really are tough conversations."

Broadband Expansion



In an earlier panel, officials discussed a less life-threatening issue, but one that threatens to prevent rural residents from growing their businesses, getting a quality education and accessing health care — [access to broadband internet](#) .

Estimates put the number of Wisconsinites without broadband internet access at around 650,000, according to Jaron McCallum, the state broadband director at the Wisconsin Public Service Commission (PSC). He said about another 650,000 can't afford the broadband that is available in their communities.

The three people on the broadband panel discussed how communities can tap into the massive amounts of money flowing to rural areas to address the issue. Gov. Tony Evers included millions in [broadband expansion money](#) in his biennial budget. The federal American Rescue Plan Act and infrastructure bill [sent even more money](#) to rural areas, bringing the internet to the state's hardest to reach places.

What local officials need to do, they said, is tap into their communities to plan for how to access the available money and then execute a plan once the money has been received.

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“You need to think about who does broadband touch and who’s having the same type of issues, health care, education, economic development, providers, community organizations,” said Gail Huycke, the community development outreach specialist at UW-Madison’s Division of Extension.

The PSC is currently in the process of evaluating a new round of broadband expansion grant applications. The panelists said that just getting the money isn’t enough for local officials. Beyond the funding, officials need to be ready to help the project along — whether that’s working out how local zoning rules will be applied or having departments of public works clear out brush in more remote communities, they said.

“You do have a role and I always say, don’t abandon your role,” Huycke said. “You have a responsibility, and that doesn’t end when you get the grant. That [responsibility] goes after the grant to make sure it’s implemented.”

by Henry Redman, [Wisconsin Examiner](#)
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