

January 9, 2024

On January 4, 2024, Morrow County Health District received a written request from Morrow County to extend our notice period to discontinue ambulance services (currently set to expire March 12, 2024). On January 8, 2024, the MCHD Board voted unanimously **not** to extend the notice period. We feel it is important to explain this decision to the public.

1. First and foremost, we do not believe an extension is in the best interests of our communities or our ambulance crews. A swift resolution to this situation is necessary to mitigate serious, ongoing safety issues occurring in the field as a result of the conflict over which entity should provide ambulance service.
2. There are still two months of the notice period remaining. We believe that period of time is sufficient to resolve the issues that caused MCHD to give notice if the County prioritizes a resolution.
3. We are concerned that Morrow County is not prioritizing a resolution. The County Administrator stated both privately and publicly that MCHD would receive another draft of the Ambulance Service Area Plan and Ordinance by January 5, 2024. As this letter is being written, those documents still have not been received and the County Administrator did not respond to inquiries about them until January 8, 2024.
4. The County has imposed strict deadlines on MCHD to respond to requests from the County (6 days to respond to the request to extend, 48 hours to respond to the new draft of the ASA Plan and Ordinance), but the County is not meeting their own deadlines.
5. In April of 2023, the County determined it would act under the 1998 ASA Plan and Ordinance. The County is not following the processes laid out in those documents with regard to updating the ASA Plan and evaluating service providers. Without a plan to fall back on, the County is making up the process as they go. This has created a lack of transparency and a moving target. When this subject was brought to the BOC, the County Administrator stated the BOC may repeal the 1998 Ordinance rather than follow the processes prescribed.
6. In a press release on January 5, 2024, the County Administrator stated that MCHD has refused to participate further in the process of developing a new ASA Plan. This is not correct. Since giving notice, MCHD has met with the County Administrator twice to work on the new ASA Plan and has attended both meetings of the Board of Commissioners at which this topic was discussed. MCHD has never ceased to participate in this process.
7. Given the County's press release, we feel it is time to invoke section 5(f) on page 25 of the 1998 ASA Plan, which lays out a process to follow in the event that a provider gives notice to vacate the ASA. Section 5(f) reads: ***In the event a satisfactory solution to all parties involved cannot be reached within a reasonable amount of time, the EMS Advisory Committee will appoint a task force comprised of representative from: each ambulance service, the Board, the medical community and a citizen of each community involved (not affiliated with the health care industry), to reach a reasonable and workable solution.***

We have formally requested that the County engage the standing EMS Advisory Committee to begin this process.

We have received many questions from the public and we are committed to providing information quickly and transparently. Questions may be submitted to community@mocohd.org. Below are some of the questions we have received most frequently.

Why has Morrow County Health District given notice to discontinue ambulance service?

In April of 2023, Morrow County decided to change the Ambulance Service Area Plan and the Ordinance that govern how ambulance services work in our County. The County Administrator sent MCHD a draft to review in October and MCHD sent significant feedback and concerns. The County Administrator stated he would get back to MCHD about feedback before submitting these documents to the Oregon Health Authority, but did not do that. Instead, the County submitted new drafts that MCHD had never seen to OHA and indicated that MCHD would provide services under the new rules.

By sending documents to OHA, the County started the first step in the approval process for their draft ASA Plan and Ordinance. Both documents still have language that MCHD cannot agree to operate under – it presents too much of a financial and operational risk to the District and could jeopardize all of the District’s healthcare services. MCHD consulted with legal counsel and ultimately determined that it was necessary to give a 90-day notice to terminate service. If MCHD had not done this, the County could have approved those plans and forced MCHD to operate under the new rules.

Has MCHD asked Morrow County to subsidize ambulance services?

Yes. Ambulance services are costly and generally operate at a loss – this is particularly true in rural areas where the volume of transports is low. It is common practice for Counties to pay ambulance service providers even in metro areas where those providers are private entities - this is because Counties have the statutory obligation to provide for ambulance service.

When MCHD started providing ambulance service in 1995, it cost just \$182,500 to operate the service. Factoring in revenue, this resulted in an annual loss of about \$10,000 to operate the ambulance service. In 2023, it cost \$3,400,000 to operate the ambulance service, which resulted in a loss of \$1,250,000.

Costs have increased over the past 28 years, but MCHD has also significantly enhanced the ambulance service. MCHD now operates twice as many ambulances and moved from an all-volunteer system to a system that is fully staffed by paid employees. This was necessary to keep up with the need for services across Morrow County and to comply with the County’s 2021 request to enhance services. Despite these increases, MCHD has not increased its tax rate in over 15 years.

The costs to operate an ambulance service are fixed, meaning it costs about the same to pay for ambulances, equipment, supplies, and personnel regardless of how many runs occur.

MCHD receives cost-based reimbursement from Medicare and Medicaid, which means that MCHD is reimbursed at a higher rate than other providers. MCHD is the only entity in the area that is eligible for this type of reimbursement. An analysis by MCHD’s accounting firm showed that without cost-based reimbursement, the total loss for 2023 would have been \$2,500,000.

At this point, Morrow County is likely to be required to subsidize any incoming service provider because services cannot be provided at the current levels without operating at a loss. MCHD’s ability to bring Federal and State dollars to the table make MCHD the most fiscally responsible choice of ambulance service providers.

Who is currently providing ambulance service in Morrow County?

MCHD continues to provide ambulance service to all of Morrow County. Ambulance service will be provided by MCHD until at least March 12, 2024. We are continuing our efforts to reach an agreement with Morrow County that will allow us to provide ongoing ambulance services countywide.

Why does Morrow County Health District oppose splitting up the ambulance service area?

MCHD provides ambulance services to all of Morrow County in a coordinated manner.

There are two ambulances in Boardman and two in Irrigon. These locations cross cover, meaning that if an ambulance goes out in Boardman, the ambulance in Irrigon is prepared to respond and vice versa. Both stations can mobilize a second crew as needed. There are some circumstances, such as extreme weather, when all four ambulances are in service and Quick Response Teams are mobilized as backup. This works seamlessly because the crews use an app called Active 9-1-1, which allows instant communication with all EMS personnel.

To serve Heppner, Lexington, and Lone, there are two ambulances in Heppner and one in Lone. Quick Response Teams are formally established in Lone, Lexington, and remote parts of Heppner. Using Active 9-1-1, a total of three ambulances can be mobilized and Quick Response Teams can be mobilized as backup.

The number of transports in Boardman, Irrigon, and Heppner are typically about the same: in FY 2023, Boardman had 336 transports, Irrigon had 323 transports, and Heppner had 293 transports.

MCHD’s response times are better than National averages and are significantly better than the response times required by the local Ambulance Service Area Plan.

We are concerned that splitting up the ambulance service area will result in less coordinated services and increased response times, particularly if a service provider is responsible for staffing both ambulance and fire simultaneously.

302 Wilson Lane
Boardman, OR 97818



705 N Main Ave NE
Irrigon, OR 97844



Quick Response Team
Lexington, OR



Quick Response Team
lone, OR



Quick Response Team
Blake’s Ranch, Heppner, OR



OHV Park Medical Station
Heppner, OR

564 E Pioneer Drive
Heppner, OR 97836



160 West Main Street
lone, OR 97843

