

Working as an EMT Robert Mietlicki



What is the nature of the work?

The work of Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) is often the difference between life and death for a patient. EMTs respond to various medical emergencies including car accidents, heart attacks, slips and falls of the elderly, childbirth, and gunshot wounds.¹ In responding to emergencies, EMTs assess a patient's condition, determine pre-existing medical conditions, and provide emergency care while transporting patients to an emergency room.² EMTs often work with police officers and firefighters in responding to emergencies.

Once they arrive at the medical facility, EMTs help transfer patients from the ambulance to the emergency room and provide doctors with an assessment of the patient's condition.³ Often EMTs will continue to assist the hospital staff in caring for a patient.⁴ Aside from responding to medical emergencies, EMTs also transport patients between different medical facilities – often when patients need the care of specialists or need to be transported to long-term care facilities, such as nursing homes, after visits to the emergency room.⁵

What are the requirements to be an EMT?

J is a 24 year old engaged male working as an EMT for Twin City Ambulance in the northern suburbs of Buffalo.⁶ There are a few basic requirements to work for Twin City Ambulance. EMTs must be able to lift between 50-100 pounds. They also need to work with a partner and

work well under the pressure of an emergency medical situation. Also, they need to ability to drive an ambulance, which means they cannot have any DWIs or accidents on their records. Finally, they must have the ability to earn New York State EMT certification, which means they cannot be registered sex offenders.

A high school diploma is usually required to begin training to become an EMT.⁷ There are three levels of training: EMT-Basic, EMT-Intermediate, and Paramedic. At the EMT-Basic level, training is focused on basic emergency skills like managing respiratory, trauma, and cardiac emergencies and assessing a patient.⁸ Coursework is combined with practical experience in an ambulance. J received specific instruction on dealing with broken bones, obstructed airways, bleeding and cardiac arrest.⁹ He was also trained on how to use medical equipment such as backboards, stretchers, splints and oxygen delivery systems.¹⁰



What are some of the duties and responsibilities of an EMT?

The duties of an EMT remain fairly constant from shift to shift. J and his partner “wait for a call from the 911 dispatcher and then respond to the situation.”¹¹ Once on the scene, J and his partner assess the situation, begin any treatments that are necessary, and prepare the patient for transport to the necessary medical facility. After transport, J gives the doctors and nurses an assessment of the patient’s situation and waits to see if they need any other help. Apart from dealing with emergency situations, J does “mountains of paperwork.”¹²

J responds to similar emergencies from one day to the next. “Typical calls that we respond to in the Tonawanda and Amherst areas include syncope, which is dizziness, diabetic emergencies and elderly distress such as loneliness and slip and falls. In the summer it is filled with kids being kids. We respond to sports injuries, slips near the pool, falls off the bike and other things like that.”¹³

What are some of the benefits of working as an EMT?

J is currently receiving basic health benefits through his employment with Twin City Ambulance. Aside from these benefits, “at Twin City you can get a couple of free ambulance rides for your family each year.”¹⁴ One big difference he sees between Twin City Ambulance and its primary competitor, Rural/Metro, is that Rural/Metro will pay for people to get their initial EMT-Basic training as long as they sign a commitment to work with them for at least one year.¹⁵ “There are not enough people working for either company, so in order to recruit, that’s one strategy Rural/Metro is using.”¹⁶ Twin City Ambulance does not provide this option. Also, neither company will pay for people to become paramedics unless they are full time employees.¹⁷

J is a member of the International Association of EMTs and Paramedics Local 394, the union that represents Twin City Ambulance’s nearly 200 workers.¹⁸ In 2007, the IAEP negotiated a new contract with Twin City. Under the terms of the contract, starting wages for employees with EMT-Basic training ranges from \$27,000 to \$28,900 annually.¹⁹ This represents a 26% increase in wages, from \$7.95 to \$10.00 per hour.²⁰



Aside from the employment-based benefits J receives, he gets a lot of satisfaction out of his job. He knows he is helping people with his work and finds fulfillment in his job, especially when the people he helps are thankful. He also enjoys the people he works with because they “goof around and tell jokes and stories when we aren’t on calls.”²¹

What are some of the challenges felt by an EMT working in Western New York?

J says the biggest challenge in his job is dealing with the down time between calls. J and his partner “will literally move from street corner to street corner and ‘post up’ waiting for a call. There are intersections that we wait near, such as the 290 and Niagara Falls Boulevard, that are strategically located by multiple roads that are major roads so that we can quickly respond to calls. Once we are at a post, we can take out a book and relax and wait until we need to move to another post or go on a call.”²²

J also does not like having to deal with difficult patients. “It’s a shame, but a lot of people in the Amherst area use ambulances as a personal taxi service to the hospital.”²³ This frustrates J because often the people who use ambulances as a ride to the hospital do not need emergency care.

Instead of waiting for people who actually need help, J and his partner have to waste their time with these patients.

J has friends who work as EMTs for Rural/Metro in the poorer neighborhoods of Buffalo. J considers himself lucky that he found a job working with Twin City Ambulance in the northern suburbs of Buffalo. “For the amount of problems we put up with, we don’t get paid enough. That is the truth. In the City of Buffalo it’s even worse. The EMTs for Rural/Metro get paid less, go on more calls, and there are just not enough of them. In the middle of the day on let’s say a Thursday, the average wait time for an ambulance in the City of Buffalo is somewhere near 20 minutes. Now obviously the Buffalo Fire Department will respond immediately, but to get a Rural/Metro ambulance to the scene and then get the patient to a hospital is an ordeal.”²⁴ Obviously proud of his work, J boasts that the average response time for Twin City Ambulance is “less than 10 minutes.”²⁵

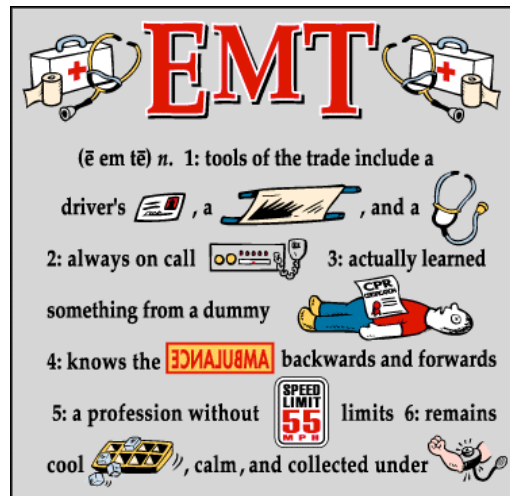
Currently, J is working full-time receiving \$10.30 per hour.²⁶ Most weeks he works over 40 hours.²⁷ He is currently working on finishing a bachelor’s degree and dreams of one day being able to go to pharmacy school. J lives with his fiancé, who is going to medical school. The couple is able to pay rent and other necessary expenses, but J fears an emergency. They have some savings from J’s time in the Army, “but they are not large enough to handle life-changing situations.”²⁸ Also, the couple wonders how they are going to pay for their wedding, “which won’t be very large,” but they hope to receive help from their parents.²⁹



What are the prospects for EMT work?

Earnings for EMTs highly vary with the geographical location and the level of an individual’s training. In 2008, the median hourly wage of EMTs was \$14.10.³⁰ In 2008, 28 percent of EMTs were unionized or worked under contracts protected by a union.³¹ According to Bureau of Labor Statistics projections, from 2004 to 2014, nationally there will be 74,000 total job openings due to growth and net replacement in the EMT field.³² In the larger healthcare industry, 3.2 millions new wage and salary jobs will be created between 2008 and 2018.³³ Nationally, 10 of the 20 fastest growing occupations are part of the healthcare industry.³⁴

Much of the growth in the field is projected to come from the need to replace individuals who leave to work in the private sector.³⁵ Also, unpaid volunteer fire companies that provide EMT services are finding it difficult to recruit individuals. Paid EMTs will replace the volunteers over time.³⁶ Growth in the field will also occur because of the country's aging population. As the population ages, demand for medical services will most likely increase.³⁷ Furthermore, hospitals increasingly specialize in treating certain illness or conditions. EMTs will be needed to transport patients between general care facilities and specialized facilities.³⁸



In New York State, there are currently 13,380 individuals working as EMTs and paramedics.³⁹ The mean yearly wages for EMTs is \$38,700 with a median of \$37,370. Projections to 2016 about labor in Western New York show that growth among healthcare support workers is considered favorable.⁴⁰ According to long-term occupational projections to 2016, EMTs and paramedics rank 24th in the list of the Top 25 Fastest Growing Professions in Western New York.⁴¹ Over ten years, there is projected to be a 14.5% growth in the number of employees, from 550 in 2006 to 630 in 2016.⁴²

One of the most pressing issues facing the EMS profession is the retention of experienced EMTs and paramedics. National statistics show that the turnover rate for the medical transportation industry is 18.2% annually.⁴³ Private-sector EMS organizations report an annual turnover rate close to the national average of 39.7% for all transportation providers.⁴⁴ The poor retention rates of EMTs can be attributed to several factors including “concerns for personal safety, stressful working conditions, irregular hours, excessive training and requirements, limited mobility, and low wages.”⁴⁵

Compounding the retention issue is the projection that the supply of EMTs will most likely not meet the demand in the next decades. The Bureau of

Labor Statistics forecasts a need for 69,000 more EMS workers by 2014.⁴⁶ This would represent an increase of 35%.⁴⁷ Replacement costs of EMS workers are roughly \$12,000 per worker.⁴⁸ Because the turnover rate will most likely increase over time, replacement costs will become an enormous cost for EMS organizations in the coming decades.⁴⁹

The National Association of Emergency Medical Technicians recently issued a statement advocating fair pay and benefits for EMTs. EMTs provide an essential service to communities across the country, but “wages and benefits have not increased to enable the EMS workforce to grow in accordance with the ever-increasing public demand for EMS services. The pay of EMTs and paramedics is significantly less overall than that of law enforcement, firefighters, and other allied healthcare occupations.”⁵⁰

¹ Bureau of Labor Statistics. *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2010-2011 Edition*. Emergency Medical Technicians and Paramedics. Retrieved on February 25, 2010 from <http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos101.htm>.

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ Personal communication with EMT J on March 13, 2010.

⁷ Bureau of Labor Statistics, *supra* note 1.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ Personal communication with EMT J on March 13, 2010.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ Press Releaser, Twin City Ambulance, Twin City Ambulance and the International Association of EMTs and Paramedics Sign New Labor Deal (June 26, 2007). Retrieved on March 30, 2010 from http://www.tcaems.com/tca_press_release_06_26_07.html.

²⁰ Matt Glynn, *Twin City Ambulance workers approve new contract*, THE BUFFALO NEWS, June 30, 2007.

²¹ Personal communication with EMT J on March 13, 2010.

²² *Id.*

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ Bureau of Labor Statistics, *supra* note 1.

³¹ *Id.*

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- ³² Bureau of Labor Statistics. *Occupational Employment Projections to 2014*. Retrieved on February 25, 2010 from <http://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2005/11/art5full.pdf>.
- ³³ Bureau of Labor Statistics. *Career Guide to Industries, 2010-2011 Edition*. Healthcare. Retrieved on February 25, 2010 from <http://www.bls.gov/oco/cg/cgs035.htm>.
- ³⁴ *Id.*
- ³⁵ Bureau of Labor Statistics, *supra* note 1.
- ³⁶ *Id.*
- ³⁷ *Id.*
- ³⁸ *Id.*
- ³⁹ NYS Department of Labor. *Occupational Wages in New York State*. Retrieved on March 23, 2010 from <http://www.labor.state.ny.us/stats/lswage2.asp>.
- ⁴⁰ NYS Department of Labor. *Employment Prospectus to 2016, Western New York Region*. Retrieved on March 23, 2010 from <http://www.labor.state.ny.us/stats/descriptor.asp>.
- ⁴¹ NYS Department of Labor. *Long-Term Occupational Projections to 2016, Top 25 Fastest Growing Western New York Region*. Retrieved on March 30, 2010 from <http://www.labor.state.ny.us/stats/faster.shtm#wny>.
- ⁴² *Id.*
- ⁴³ Brian Whitaker, *Emerging Issues in Private Emergency Medical Transportation: Turnover, Demand & Selection* at 2. Retrieved on March 30, 2010 from <http://www.avestacorp.com/pdfs/Avesta-White-Paper-Turnover-Demand-Selection-in-Private-EMS.pdf>.
- ⁴⁴ *Id.*
- ⁴⁵ Guy David and Tanguy Brachet, *Retention, learning by doing, and performance in emergency medical services*, HEALTH SERVICES RESEARCH, June 1, 2009.
- ⁴⁶ Whitaker, *supra* note 44.
- ⁴⁷ *Id.*
- ⁴⁸ *Id.*
- ⁴⁹ *Id.*
- ⁵⁰ National Association of Emergency Medical Technicians. *NEAMT Advocates Fair Pay and Benefits for EMS Practitioners in New Position Statement*. Retrieved on February 25, 2010 from http://www.naemt.org/WhatsNewALLNEWS/10-02-09/NAEMT_Advocates_for_Fair_Pay_and_Benefits_for_EMS_Practitioners_in_New_Position_Statement.aspx?ReturnURL=%2fdefault.aspx.