

# Union loses fight against firefighter house calls



Scott Cooper Williams, Press-Gazette Media 6:22 p.m. CST January 27, 2015



(Photo: File/Press-Gazette Media)

The union for Green Bay firefighters has lost a nearly two-year fight against a city initiative requiring firefighters to make house calls on discharged hospital patients.

A state labor arbitrator has ruled the city was within its rights to initiate a program in which Bellin Hospital paid the city \$50 for each house call.

But whether the so-called Hook and Ladder program will move forward in its original structure remains to be seen.

City officials suspended the program indefinitely while awaiting a decision on the grievance filed by the Green Bay Professional Fire Fighters Association.

The union argued that Hook and Ladder was an improper expansion of firefighters duties and that the city could not impose such new assignments unilaterally under the union's contract.

Arbitrator William Houlihan disagreed and ruled that checking on discharged hospital patients in their homes does not represent a significant deviation from the emergency medical services already provided by fire departments.

"The parties have accommodated the changing nature of fire service," Houlihan wrote in a decision dated Jan. 20.

Green Bay Mayor Jim Schmitt said he was pleased with the ruling and is hopeful about reviving the program in one form or another.

Schmitt said he would meet with fire officials and health care industry representatives to determine the best way to proceed. Firefighter union leaders also will be consulted, he said, calling Green Bay's firefighters among the best in the state.

If the city continues to collect a fee for the house-call service, the City Council's approval would be needed, Schmitt said.

Describing the Hook and Ladder concept as a worthwhile effort to promote public safety, the mayor added: "It's just a terrific way to support the community and utilize the talents we have in this community."

Firefighters union President Chad Bronkhorst said his organization never objected to the house-call concept, only to the manner in which it was implemented by the city. The union represents about 175 employees in the Green Bay Metro Fire Department.

Bronkhorst said adding new duties to firefighters could affect other services provided. But the union will not pursue its grievance any further, he said, and firefighters will adjust to whatever assignment the city has for them.

"It's like anything else," Bronkhorst said. "You call us, and we'll be there."

The city launched the Hook and Ladder program in March 2013 after negotiating an arrangement with Bellin Hospital to have firefighters visit discharged patients in their homes to minimize their risk of requiring readmission to the hospital.

The objective was to control Bellin's costs under the expensive readmission process, by asking firefighters to ensure that patients were taking their medications and following other hospital discharge instructions. During each call, firefighters also checked the patient's home for fire prevention and general safety measures.

If the public-private partnership worked well, some proponents thought other hospitals would be interested in pursuing the same service with Green Bay firefighters.

But after the concept was introduced as a pilot project with Bellin, the firefighters union raised objections to the Wisconsin Employment Relations Commission, and the program was suspended.

With the union issue now settled, Bellin Health Vice President Andrea Werner said she hopes to see the program revived and implemented in a way that has the sort of positive impact that Werner said has occurred elsewhere under similar initiatives. In Green Bay, she said, there have been "many lessons learned."

"We'll have continued discussions with city officials and the Green Bay Fire Department to determine what adjustments may be needed and how we will proceed," she said.

Some Green Bay aldermen also have questioned the Hook and Ladder concept.

Alderman Chris Wery, chairman of the City Council Protection and Welfare Committee, said the city should charge more than \$50 per house call. He called the original program "a sweetheart deal" for Bellin Hospital.

Wery also said he would favor getting other hospitals involved and making it a revenue generator for the city.

"It's a program worth doing," he said, "if we tweak it and do it right."

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