

MEMO

TO: Finance Committee
FROM: Chief Tanya Reynen
DATE: May 19, 2026
RE: 2027 Budget Personnel Request

Background

Watertown Fire Department has continued to experience increasing service demand, particularly within EMS response and simultaneous incident activity. In 2025, the department responded to 3,205 incidents, the highest annual call volume in department history. Approximately 22-28% of incidents occurred while another emergency call was already in progress, creating increasing pressure on daily staffing and response reliability.

The department currently operates with a minimum staffing level of seven personnel per shift, with funded staffing of nine personnel intended to account for vacation usage and normal leave coverage. After several years of staffing instability and turnover, the department is now fully staffed; however, operational demand continues to exceed the capabilities of the current deployment model.

Even during a single incident with no overlapping calls, Watertown's on-duty staffing levels remain below NFPA 1710 effective response force benchmarks. Under ideal conditions, with no personnel on vacation and all staffed units immediately available, the department typically places approximately 7–9 personnel on scene within the first eight minutes. This remains significantly below the approximately 15–17 personnel identified by NFPA 1710 for a typical residential structure fire requiring coordinated fire attack, search and rescue, ventilation, water supply, rapid intervention, EMS support, and command functions.

During simultaneous EMS incidents, personnel are frequently reassigned from Engine 61 in order to place a second ambulance in service. This reduces available staffing for fire suppression operations and limits the department's ability to safely and effectively place additional apparatus, such as the ladder or tender, into service without waiting for off-duty personnel or mutual aid resources to arrive. In some situations, the ladder, tender or brush truck is initially placed in service with only one firefighter assigned until additional staffing can respond.

Mutual aid remains an important regional partnership; however, neighboring departments are consistently 20–25 minutes away due to travel distance and dispatching processes. As a result, the initial stages of fire suppression, rescue, and life safety operations must be managed by on-duty Watertown personnel. The first several minutes of a fire or rescue incident are often the most critical for civilian survivability, fire containment, and firefighter safety, making adequate on-duty staffing essential for both EMS and fire response operations.

An additional operational consideration is the implementation of Emergency Medical Dispatch (EMD) within

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Jefferson County. EMD is a state and county-directed dispatch model that utilizes nationally recognized medical dispatch protocols to provide pre-arrival instructions to callers and identify incidents requiring an Advanced Life Support (ALS) response. These protocols go live June 1, 2026, demand for ALS resources may increase both within the City of Watertown and throughout the surrounding service area.

As the primary ALS provider for much of the region, Watertown paramedic resources may be increasingly requested through these standardized dispatch processes. While these responses support existing service agreements that include financial gain for the city, they also increase the frequency that personnel may be committed to EMS incidents, placing additional pressure on daily staffing levels and response reliability. Maintaining adequate on-duty staffing is important to ensure the department can continue providing reliable emergency response to City of Watertown residents while meeting its ALS obligations and commitments throughout the service area.

The request for six additional firefighter/paramedic positions, two per shift, is intended to start addressing these operational gaps and improve response reliability for both EMS and fire incidents.

This staffing increase would allow the department to:

- Staff a second EMS unit daily without removing personnel from Engine 61
- Maintain engine company staffing while handling overlapping EMS calls
- Improve the department's ability to place a two-person ladder company in service when operationally needed
- Improve the ability to place specialty equipment in service without relying on delayed callback staffing
- Reduce delays in secondary EMS responses
- Strengthen fireground operations during the critical early stages of an incident prior to mutual aid arrival

Over the last several years, the department has also intentionally worked to strengthen EMS operations, training, deployment efficiency, technology integration, and billing practices. These operational improvements, combined with increasing call demand, have resulted in increasing EMS transport revenue. According to MIVIEWPOINT reporting, EMS revenue increased from approximately \$850,000 in 2023 to approximately \$1.02 million in 2025.

This request is not solely about increasing staffing numbers. It is focused on maintaining reliable emergency response capability as service demand increases, improving operational resiliency during simultaneous incidents, reducing risk to personnel and the public, and supporting sustainable emergency response service delivery for the City of Watertown.

Financial Impact

The addition of six firefighter/paramedic positions would increase personnel costs associated with wages, benefits, equipment, onboarding, and training. The attached personnel request is the cost per firefighter added.

The department has experienced measurable growth in EMS revenue over the same period due to increasing

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transport volume and operational improvements. While EMS revenue does not fully offset personnel costs, it demonstrates continued service demand and partially supports the operational expansion necessary to maintain response reliability. The department continues to work with partners to improve revenue to support Fire and EMS functions.

Additionally, improving staffing stability may assist in reducing certain overtime pressures associated with callback staffing, extended incidents, simultaneous calls, and ambulance coverage gaps.

Recommendation

Recommend approval of six additional firefighter/paramedic positions to improve EMS system reliability, maintain engine company staffing during simultaneous incidents, strengthen fireground operational capability, improve firefighter and public safety, and support sustainable emergency response service delivery for the City of Watertown.