TIME, TALENT, AND TREASURE

How to protect and cultivate the three most valuable assets for EMS workers

Today's leading EMS systems promote a positive work culture in which processes are streamlined, inefficiencies are minimized and open collaboration among staff and leadership is encouraged.

As EMS agencies nationwide struggle with staff attrition, these concepts are more critical than ever, says Robbi King, sales solutions engineer at Vector Solutions who spent his earlier career in the fire and rescue services. While there is no one-size-fits-all playbook for safeguarding the most valuable asset of an EMS agency—its crews on the street—there are specific strategies that can be employed to ensure you are doing everything you can to inspire and support your workforce, King says.

What do these concepts mean in practice? Read on for success stories of agencies placing the well-being of their crews first and foremost.

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PART 1: TIME

Maximizing efficiency and reducing unproductive processes

Although providing prehospital emergency care may not be the main reason many join the fire service, like the Albany Fire Department in New York, EMS calls are often the majority of calls personnel respond to. Keeping everyone on track to meet strict EMS recertification requirements in addition to fire training can be a challenge.

As an "all hazards" department, the Albany Fire Department responds to medical emergencies, HAZMAT incidents, technical rescues, and maritime emergencies, in addition to fire suppression calls. The department's 250 career members are stationed at eight stations across the 27 square miles of the city of Albany, serving its roughly 100,000 residents. The specialized skills needed to protect the community require significant training time to ensure members stay competent, compliant, and safe.

Bundled Training Keeps Admins and Users On Track

Lt. John Tidings heads the EMS training program in the Division of Training and Safety at the Albany Fire Department. With 24 years in the fire service, Lt. Tidings understands how critical training is and shared how he utilizes an intuiive LMS platform to make sure his people are ready and able to answer the 25,000+ EMS calls they get every year.

Key training and compliance areas include:
- Advanced Cardiac Life Support
- Pediatric Advanced Life Support
- CPR cards
- New York State Department of Health EMS certification requirements

Bundling related training courses and activities in a credential with the ability to
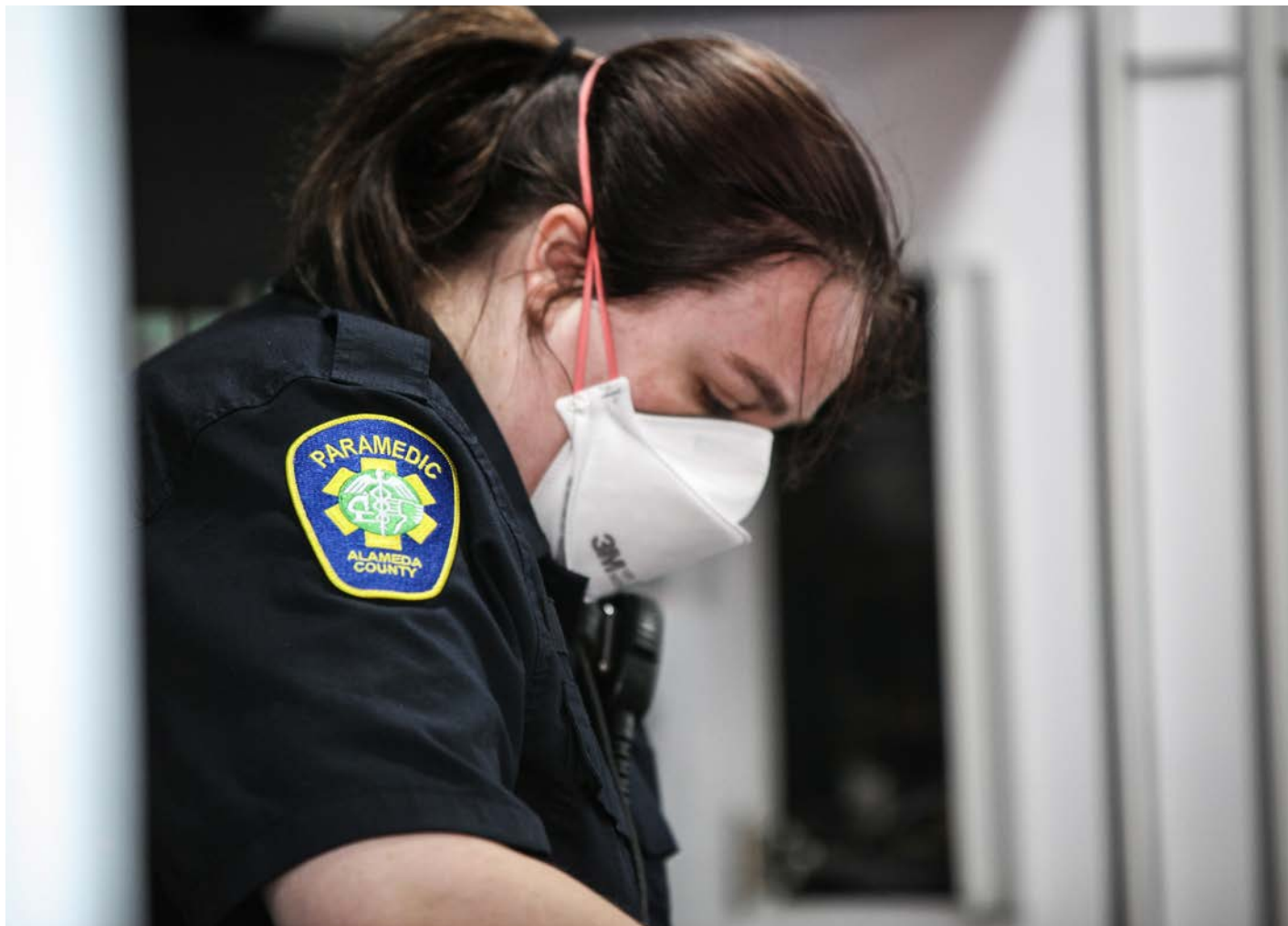
set up custom alerts, due dates, and reports provides Lt. Tidings with complete insight into who is falling behind and keeps members accountable.

Like many cities, the Albany Fire Department has to comply with state and local EMS training requirements in addition to NREMT recertification requirements. With an all-inclusive training and credentialing platform, the department can easily track and manage the city of Albany and New York state EMS requirements with custom credentials for their EMTs and paramedics.

Online Learning Fulfills EMS CEs & Required City Training

By incorporating 250+ hours of CAPCE-accredited EMS continuing education courses and activities for their EMT and Paramedic credentials, every Albany FD employee can fulfill 100% of their EMS CE requirements for recertification online with the platform.

Lt. Tidings, who has been a paramedic for 17 years, reflected on the value of being able to complete required EMS training online compared to in-person, especially with social distancing practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. "When I first started, for every single hour of CE, you had to go somewhere and sit in a classroom. It was kind of a pain," he said. "We're at a point now that EMS training is 100% online, and that was before the pandemic. Now, it's a no-brainer. No one has wanted to put a class together of 30-40 people in a room during the last two years."

In addition to delivering essential continuing education training hours for EMS recertification and tracking critical compliance requirements, Lt. Tidings leverages the system to satisfy mandatory cultural diversity, violence in the workforce, and sexual harassment training required of all city of Albany employees. With customizable reports, it's quick and easy for Lt. Tidings to extract the data he needs for compliance.

PART 2: TALENT

Supporting and encouraging your most precious asset

A recent report by Michigan ABC affiliate WXYZ reported that finding people to work on Michigan's first responder front lines is harder than it's ever been. Many contributing factors are outside the control of EMS leaders, such as pandemic burnout, keeping up with an increasing population to serve, and finding time for the stringent training and recertification requirements.

Staffing shortages in the EMS and rescue service have broad and serious impacts, such as slower response to emergency patient care. However, EMS leaders do have control over one area to help their thinly stretched teams—adding technology to remove many manual, time-consuming administrative processes, and provide mobile technology to simplify job requirements for their staff.

Texas Township Fire & Rescue Department, located two hours west of Detroit, Michigan, faces the same challenges as many small-to-medium municipalities in servicing a community's EMS needs with volunteer and paid-on-call staff. The area has been expanding in population and transforming from a rural farming community to a white-collar, vacation community that offers appealing tax rates for large vacation homes.

Texas Township F&R operates on a staff of six full-time employees and a chief, plus a full-time administrative captain. The rest of the 17 staff are paid-on-call members who have other full-time or part-time jobs.

Training From Home With Online Options

Matthew Dawson, Training Officer at Texas Township F&R, said that implementing a new training management platform has saved him a lot of administrative time in managing the department's training program, and made it easier for their 17 paid-on-call personnel to fit in their training requirements since they can "complete an online training course from their home with one hand while holding their baby in the other."

Dawson, who has served at Texas Township F&R for over a decade, is in charge of the training records, lesson plans, and training SOGs/SOPs for the agency. He implemented the LMS system in 2019 to keep all training records and policies in one place, as well as assign and track all training and policy acknowledgements. With a full library of online courses approved by CAPCE and the state of Michigan, Dawson can deliver online training for their staff to take when it fits into their schedules, as well as assign and track all of their own custom training. The LMS training management system makes it easy to track all their required training and license expirations, and ensure every hour of training is accounted for and no one falls behind.

A Better Tool for Training Management

Before the changeover to the new system, the agency was using an RMS to track their training hours, but it didn't have the ability to assign, deliver, and track the training, nor the dashboards and comprehensive

reporting to show who was behind on what.

"Prior to implementing the LMS training management system, I'd have to sort through a filing cabinet and manually count hours to figure out where personnel were at in their training requirements," said Dawson. "Training attendance was down and it was common for someone to tell me a week out about a required training they needed."

Now, Dawson can easily see exactly what each person needs and ensure everyone is getting the required hours without having to scramble to fit in last-minute training. He has replaced some of the in-person EMS trainings with the online courses to make it easier for his busy paid-on-call staff, and assigns three courses each quarter that are refreshers for what the first responders might be facing.

"We were able to consolidate and replace multiple software programs with the LMS Training Management System," Dawson explained. "Anything and everything training related now goes in the system. It's our complete training record for all required training, OSHA training, plus electives that our training committee have deemed important. We use the LMS digital bulletin board on the home page to post announcements, inspirational videos, and resource links, and use the LMS calendar to manage training signups."

Making Maintenance Work Orders Easy

In 2021, Texas Township F&R took another step toward digitizing and automating manual processes by implementing the Check It asset management system from Vector Solutions. Prior to this implementation, they relied on pen-and-paper systems, and what people remembered, to manage all their engines and heavy-duty equipment maintenance. Now their drivers can use their phones to perform their checks and easily create a maintenance ticket from the program if something doesn't pass. They use QR codes to scan and update inventory counts and can automatically place a reorder ticket.

Promoting a Positive Workforce Culture

Texas Township F&R, like many public safety agencies, operates on a lean staff, but they have leveraged technology to let it

do more of the work and allow them more time to focus on other areas. In addition to their training and asset management programs, Texas Township F&R also implemented Guardian Tracking in 2020 to help "collect more positive behaviors." Guardian Tracking is a performance management and early intervention solution that helps transform the culture within agencies by equipping personnel with a process for consistent feedback and positive recognition, and helps identify personnel in need of intervention before an adverse event takes place. Now supervisors and peers are equipped with a simple tool to provide systematic feedback and recognition to help catch more positive acts that might otherwise go unnoticed.

EMS personnel who do not receive consistent feedback or know how they contribute to the "big picture" are more likely to suffer burnout and seek employment elsewhere. This proactive approach to create a workforce culture that attracts and retains first responders is just one more example of the

impressive steps Texas Township F&R has taken to address the staffing challenges agencies across Michigan, and the entire country, are facing.

Keeping up EMS certifications and ISO training requirements can be challenging for any EMS department. Jacksonville Fire and Rescue Department (JFRD) leverages online training to deliver, track, and report on all EMS recertification and ISO training to help keep the department compliant.

Providing emergency medical services and fire protection for the 1 million-plus population of Jacksonville and unincorporated areas of Duval County, along with mutual aid to surrounding counties in Florida, keeps JFRD busy. The department also runs specialty divisions including Marine, HAZMAT, and USAR. District Chief William Coyle, who has been with JFRD for 14 years and is primarily responsible for ISO training, knows how critical it is to keep track of essential training when there are so many moving parts.

JFRD leverages an online LMS platform to track and deliver important communications by delivering documents as assignments that require electronically captured confirmation from personnel. Chief Coyle and other platform admins can then easily run reports to see who has and has not acknowledged assigned communications. "If I want to know if someone has completed an assignment, I can just run a report," Coyle said. "I can search the whole department, specific people, and even categories."

Meeting EMS Recertification and ISO Training Requirements

When it comes to ensuring JFRD's EMTs and paramedics maintain their EMS certifications, JFRD must be confident that their members are getting quality, reportable EMS training that fits their skil-set and recertification requirements.

With such a large spread-out and busy department, leveraging a digital classroom experience to supplement training lessons and activities helps Jacksonville Fire and Rescue Department run more efficiently. And with the ability to pre-build activities with selectable objectives, EMS personnel save time and effort completing freeform fields, and the department improves their reporting accuracy and standardization.

PART 3: TREASURE
Protecting the mental health and work-life balance of EMS crews

Northwest Volunteer Fire Department (VFD) in Texas is a combination fire department with both volunteer and full-time employees. It is comprised of four stations with more than 100 employees and volunteers. Located outside of Houston, TX, Northwest VFD serves Harris County Rural Fire Prevention District #20, now a major metropolitan area.

Before implementing an early intervention system, employee management was handled via a manual, paper-based process and documents had to be physically signed to be legally defensible. With supervisors and personnel regularly operating on different schedules, the flow of information was often delayed.

When an event occurred that needed to be tracked, such as negative behaviors, a supervisor would send a write-up to the administrator to be entered in the employee's file. Employees did not consistently receive a copy of the documentation nor

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—Wesley Cole
Northwest VFD Chief
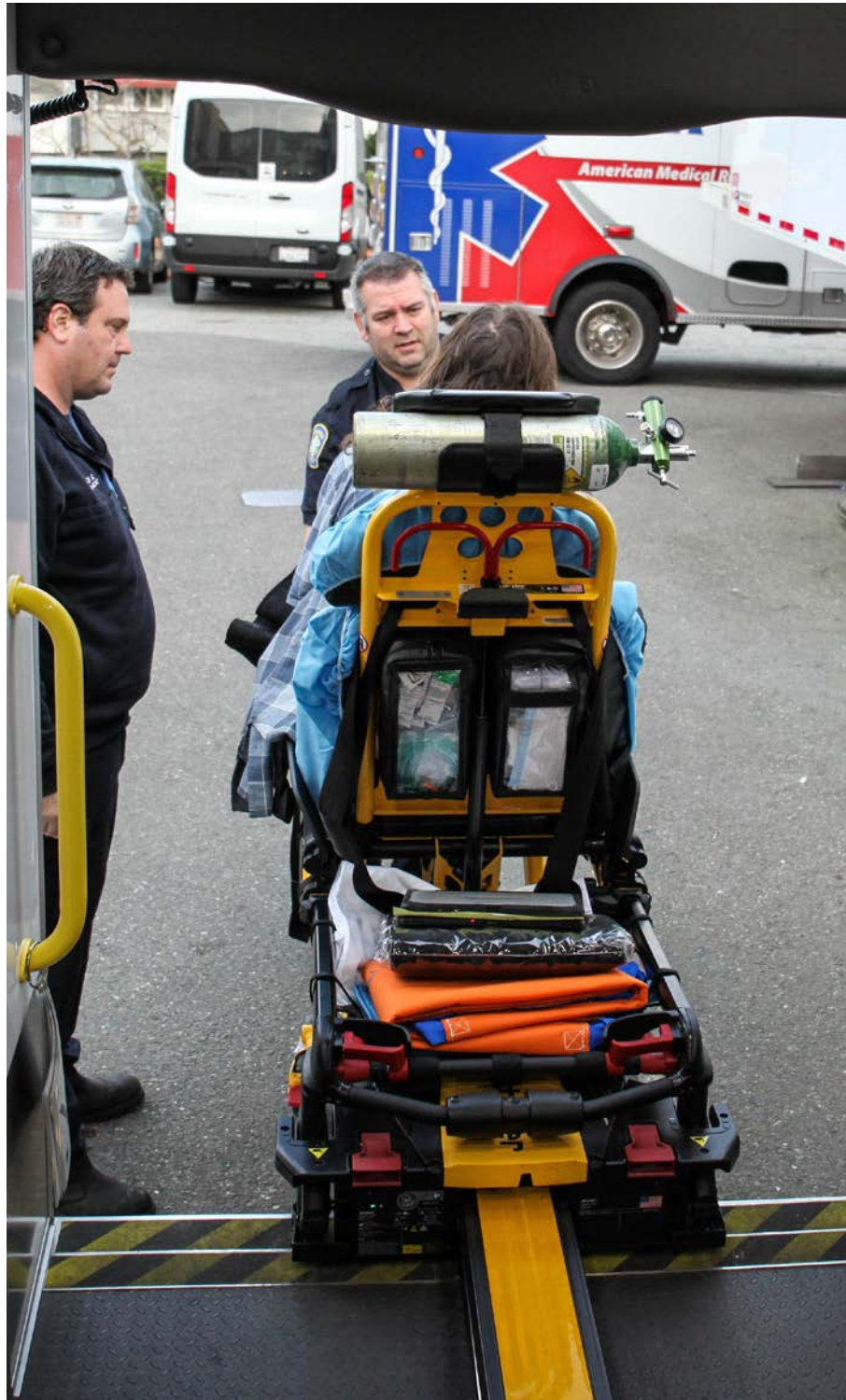
were the employee's chain of command made known of the issue.

Northwest VFD Chief Wesley Cole knew they needed stronger communication throughout the chain of command, and with a large and distributed force, a unified technology system that could be customized to their needs was the clear solution.

Additionally, Northwest VFD was starting to understand that there was more to mental health than what they'd realized.

"We always had an issue with documentation, and we started noticing that we were responding to a lot of incidents where there were deaths involved," said Cole.

As a result, Cole wanted a system that could help leadership better support their crews' mental health by increasing positive feedback and allowing visibility into critical incidents, defined as calls that involved a death.

Northwest VFD's goals for its early intervention system were focused on increasing communication, transparency, and retention.

- Track activities in one system that allows transparency at all levels— from employee to supervisor to senior leadership.
- Use documentation in the system to give immediate, transparent feedback to employees.
- Emphasize merits and positive recognition just as much as negative feedback.

Solution Deployed

Northwest VFD started using the early intervention system in March 2020 with 99 users, and has dramatically improved the flow of communication, especially when it comes to volunteer providers. The system allows documentation of daily observation reports, both positive and negative feedback, and customized events for every employee. Northwest VFD leadership can set thresholds on events to highlight patterns or notify supervisors to take action.

When information is added to the system, it can be easily accessed by leaders, supervisors, and employees themselves. With the early intervention system in place, everyone in the chain of command can now understand what the next steps are—even without meeting face-to-face.

If a leader or supervisor is out or unavailable, all employees need to do is log the appropriate information, and relevant individuals are able to see and attend to the information when their schedule allows— helping them keep in touch with their direct reports and better understand the various situations they are dealing with day-to-day. It's no longer necessary to wake up supervisors for signatures. They can read all the daily employee evaluations when their shifts begin. Supervisors know that when they return from leave, everything was handled and documented while they were away.

"One of the most positive outcomes is making sure that we are really focusing on the [provider's] mental health," said Cole.

To date, the Northwest Volunteer Fire Department has documented over 900 critical incidents.

In response, the department implemented an early intervention for critical incidents. If an employee has more than three critical incidents and a 30-day period, the supervisor is notified and schedules a check-in conversation. If leadership sees a lot of entries and interventions, they recommend paid time off for personnel.

"Just last week, I had one crew that responded to five deaths in 48 hours," said Cole. "Now we're able to see that and give them a day or two off to be with their families and get away from the stress."

In the six months that this policy has been in place, 5-6 employees have been sent home. But Cole expects this number to increase as the benefits continue to grow more apparent.

"One of my firefighters said, 'It really has made a difference in my home life. Now I understand that I'm responding to a lot of critical incidents, and I might be taking my frustrations home,' said Cole. "Now he can say, 'You know what? Maybe I need to go see a counselor.'"

To further support such efforts, Northwest VFD has implemented a mental health program with a local counseling service that specializes in first responders. "The early intervention system makes a tremendous difference, and I'm getting a lot of feedback that they absolutely love that they are getting recognized," said Cole.

OVERCOMING EMS RECERTIFICATION CHALLENGES WITH THE RIGHT TECHNOLOGY

By Naija Lambert

EMS professionals do not shy away from fast-paced, high-stakes situations. Working in various environments to provide urgent pre-hospital treatment and stabilization for a wide range of life-threatening conditions takes resilience and tenacity. It also takes a lot of ongoing training.

Acquiring all the hours of continuing education in the right components for the right EMS level from an accepted source to meet recertification requirements can be a challenge. Keeping track of training progress and maintaining complete records throughout the certification cycle can be time-consuming. Finding the time around busy work and family schedules to attend hours of continuing education classes can be daunting. Throw in nationwide crippling staffing shortages, the persistent COVID-19 pandemic, and alarming burnout rates, and the stress of recertification mounts.

Setting EMS Providers Up for Recertification Success

EMS professionals have worked too hard and are too valuable for their certification to lapse. Proactively planning training throughout the certification cycle instead of scrambling weeks before the deadline to complete hours is essential to staying ahead of recertification. Easy access to accredited online continuing education courses to reduce overtime and accommodate busy schedules can also help overcome recertification obstacles.

Whether an EMS provider needs to see where they stand or a supervisor needs to keep a pulse on who is falling behind on their team, leveraging an LMS with a training management system built for public safety can help ensure everyone stays on track with their training and compliant with their certifications.

Leveraging the Right LMS for EMS

A traditional LMS is a software application designed for the administration, documentation, tracking, reporting, and delivery of training programs and courses. It helps streamline and centralize training activities and provides valuable insight into training progress.

As beneficial as they are, traditional LMSs not built for public safety may not offer the specific functionality needed to optimize training for first responders. Agencies and EMS providers need a robust solution custom-fit for their needs.

Customized training tracks for EMRs, EMTs, AEMTs, and Paramedics that have different continuing education requirements for recertification help ensure everyone is clear on their training requirements and status.

Tracking expiration dates for certification cycles is essential for ensuring providers have completed all required continuing education before the recertification deadline.

Automated alerts and progress trackers for custom training programs can help keep everyone from leadership to providers in the loop and accountable.

Delivering online coursework through the training management system enables emergency medics to complete training from home to help get their required training.

Not all LMSs are built equal. Selecting the right one that fits the needs of EMS requires careful consideration of the full scope of training management needs. An LMS with a training management system provides end-users (EMS providers) with an optimum online learning experience and leadership with powerful training operations capabilities.

Training and Compliance Management Built for Public Safety

Vector Solutions, organizationally accredited by CAPCE, offers over 250 hours of interactive video-based online EMS continuing education courses designed to meet agency, state, and NREMT recertification requirements.

More than just an LMS, Vector LMS training management system takes the stress out of EMS recertification. Built for public safety, the system offers 24/7 access to Vector's EMS catalog and comes pre-loaded with customizable credentials (bundled training trackers) specifically developed to meet EMS compliance and recertification requirements for every provider level.

Stocked with more than enough continuing education hours to fulfill recertification requirements and organized to clearly identify how many hours are needed by category for each level, credentials give EMS leaders the confidence that they are providing access to accredited training, and EMS providers have the flexibility to select from a range of relevant courses to meet the requirements.

Staying Ahead of Recertification with Automation

Vector LMS credential automation helps keep everyone on track for recertification. Agencies can easily enroll providers into their appropriate training tracker for their level, set up alerts to notify users and supervisors of approaching or past expiration dates, and pin credentials to the user's schedule to keep recertification training top of mind.

Providers love the at-a-glance training progress bars that clearly indicate what has been completed and what remains. Supervisors love the flexible reporting, including valuable completion reports, that provides quick insight into who is falling behind across groups.

Stay Compliant, Prepared, and Certified with Vector Solutions

Ensuring your EMS personnel maintain their certifications can be challenging. From accessing accredited training to properly documenting course completions to meeting the required hours mandated by regulatory agencies and your Medical Director, there are a lot of critical pieces in play that must be executed carefully to achieve success.

Vector Solutions can help EMS providers increase compliance, boost preparedness, and improve performance with technology created with them in mind. Request a demo to see how Vector Solutions can help your EMS providers achieve recertification with ease.

Agencies and EMS providers need a robust solution custom-fit for their needs.

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Your Agency's Success Is Our Mission.

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