



Video by Jaime Green, Neil Nakahodo and Chance Swaim/The Wichita Eagle

When 8-year-old Owen Poole had a seizure and fell out of his treehouse, Sedgwick County EMS didn't get to his side for nearly 24 minutes.

Unresponsive: Crisis at Sedgwick County EMS leaves many waiting for life-saving care

By Chance Swaim and Michael Stavola | The Wichita Eagle | July 11, 2021

When you call 911 in Wichita, the odds are good that Sedgwick County EMS will show up late to a life-threatening emergency.

When 7-month-old Greyson Seng stopped breathing, Sedgwick County EMS didn't reach him for nearly 15 minutes after his father's anguished 911 call. He later died, never seeing his first birthday.

When 8-year-old Owen Poole had a seizure and fell out of his treehouse, Sedgwick County EMS didn't get to his side for nearly 24 minutes.

The national accreditation standard for life-threatening calls is 9 minutes.

Sedgwick County EMS response times have gotten dangerously slow under Dr. John Gallagher, director of the department, a Wichita Eagle investigation found.

Since 2019, when Gallagher took charge, Sedgwick County EMS has shown up late to more than 11,000 potentially fatal emergencies, no longer meeting its national accreditation standards. This year, the odds of getting life-saving medical attention in the Wichita area within 9 minutes of calling 911 are less than one in three.

Jaice Seng, Greyson's father, said the slow response time killed his baby boy. Owen's mother said the delay increased Owen's chances of permanent brain damage and death.

Eagle interviews with more than 50 past and present Sedgwick County EMS employees, county officials and EMS experts — coupled with an analysis of county records obtained by the Eagle — reveal a broken emergency medical system that's growing worse by the day, creating a public health crisis that potentially puts thousands of lives at risk of preventable death.

The slow response times are tied to a mass exodus by paramedics, who are fleeing the department in revolt against Gallagher.

"This organization is at a critical tipping point," said Cole Mitchell, a Sedgwick County paramedic. "At this point, the safety and well-being of the citizens we serve is being measured by nothing more than luck."

The Eagle also found that while Gallagher's promotion was under consideration two years ago, a powerful coalition of local authorities helped gloss over a deeply controversial EMS response that has garnered national attention: Gallagher's decision to deny an ambulance to a man with a gunshot wound to the head for 5 hours.

County leaders are aware of widespread problems in the department but have ignored, dismissed and publicly whitewashed concerns raised by EMS employees for years, the Eagle's investigation revealed.

Meanwhile, Sedgwick County EMS leaders have also made it more difficult to identify the problem. They stopped reporting response times to the public when Gallagher took over. And their internal response-time data counts only a portion of the time a patient actually waits after calling for help, The Eagle found.

Sedgwick County paramedics say they fear EMS response times are putting the entire community at risk, including their own families.

Since 2019, nearly a third of Sedgwick County EMS employees have quit, taking ambulances off the street and exposing vast areas of the county to diminished ambulance service.

Despite officials' stated concerns about staffing, having fewer paramedics was part of a plan going back years, a cost-cutting move Gallagher said would improve patient care, The Eagle found.

“It’s putting a half million people who live in this community at risk,” said Austin Woolsey, a paramedic who recently quit Sedgwick County EMS.

Paul Misasi, deputy director of EMS operations, acknowledged problems with EMS response time after The Eagle presented its findings and methodology.

“EMS leadership is both aware and concerned about this,” he said.

Greyson’s story

Jaice Seng knew something was wrong when his 2-year-old son woke him up on the morning of April 30.

“Baby,” the boy said, meaning Greyson, his 7-month-old little brother.

Greyson was lying face down. His eyes were slightly open. His body was warm but pale, Seng said.

“I just saw his legs, and I just knew something was wrong,” Seng said. “I could tell that he wasn’t breathing.”

At 8:52 a.m., he called 911.

But the closest Sedgwick County EMS post — 3 miles away — had no ambulances available. The one 3.3 miles away, also none. The closest available ambulance was 6 miles away.

By the time EMS paramedics got to Greyson, 14 minutes and 41 seconds had elapsed. That’s 5 minutes and 41 seconds longer than the 9-minute standard for a patient-not-breathing call.

The delay potentially cut Greyson’s chances of survival in half, studies show.

He died eight days later in the hospital, his brain never recovering from the lack of oxygen and blood during cardiac arrest, his father said.

Before April 30, Greyson had been a healthy baby boy, Seng said. “He would literally just wake up and look at the sun and start smiling and kicking his feet and laughing. He was just the happiest little baby ever.”

But at some point that morning, Greyson had rolled himself over, stopped breathing and gone into cardiac arrest.

Sedgwick County EMS has a response time standard that calls for arrival to at least 90% of emergencies like Greyson’s within 9 minutes, but recent studies show patients are more likely to survive if EMS arrives within 6 minutes. If they show up between 10 and 15 minutes, the chances of survival are cut in half.

It’s unclear exactly how long it took to get his heart pumping.

The ambulance was staffed with a paramedic with a year of experience and a part-time EMT hired in January. An additional paramedic with more experience was called to the scene to help. He didn't arrive until 18 minutes and 31 seconds had passed.

Seng said he believes the slow response time ultimately led to the death of his son.

"If they would have gotten there sooner, I really feel like I would still have my son," Seng said. "He was fighting. He opened his eyes and looked at us (at the hospital). He was fighting hard. He wanted to be here, but his little brain had just suffered too much."

"I mean, I caught it pretty quick," Seng said. "I could tell that he was still there a little bit, you know? But from the time it took me to call 911 to the time that they got there — he just couldn't last that long."

Gallagher declined to offer his professional opinion on whether the delayed response time contributed to Greyson's death.

"I can however tell you that none of the information I have reviewed suggests that any of the EMS care or response was unusual," Gallagher wrote in an email.

Gallagher added: "while there does not appear to be any fault to assign, I extend my deepest condolences to the parents of the deceased child. As a parent myself, I hope to never experience the anguish they must be feeling."

A growing problem

Baby Greyson is not alone. While Sedgwick County EMS responds to about 25,000 life-threatening emergencies each year, EMS leaders say the department has been unable to meet its response time standards for Wichita since before 2017 and the entire county since 2020.

On May 15, the troubles hit home for 8-year-old Owen Poole of Colwich, who had a seizure and fell from his treehouse while his parents were at dinner in Wichita.

The EMS response was so slow that Owen's mother, Cara Poole, left dinner and beat the ambulance home, even though she was 2 miles farther than the nearest EMS post. The ambulance that eventually showed up came immediately after clearing another call 12 miles away, records show.

"There was nothing, just us," Cara Poole said. "I mean our neighbors had come over to help with our 3-year-old, but otherwise there were no emergency vehicles here at all."

Owen has struggled with seizures since he was 18 months old, but he hadn't had one in 2 ½ years. His parents lived in Wichita at the time.

This time, the response was much slower.

"Every other time we've had an ambulance, they've been there before I got there," Cara Poole said. "Once, I was seven minutes away, and they were there before I got there."

It took 911 nearly 8 minutes to dispatch an ambulance and Sedgwick County EMS nearly 24 minutes to reach him.

That's 15 minutes later than the national standard and 14 minutes later than the county's own revised standard of fewer than 10 minutes for calls outside Wichita.

The delayed response time put Owen at increased risk for permanent brain damage or death, according to research on seizures. He was suffering a seizure for the duration, his mother said.

Most seizures end on their own within a few minutes, but paramedics are trained to treat any seizure that lasts more than 5 minutes as a life-threatening emergency. Research shows those that last more than 30 minutes can kill.

Cara Poole said her son's seizure lasted between 35 and 40 minutes, starting before he fell from the treehouse. Owen also suffered a concussion from the fall.

EMS paramedics say the response was delayed because of an ambulance shortage that night. At one point, EMS had seven calls on hold and no available ambulances.

Records show Sedgwick County EMS suffered from an ambulance shortage on May 15 - something that's becoming more common as paramedics quit the department. EMS registered 25 status alerts (meaning fewer than three ambulances are available for more than one minute) throughout the day.

For more than 37 minutes, no ambulances were available in the entire county the day of Owen's seizure.

"We needed EMS here," Cara Poole said. "It took so long. We just kept saying, 'Where are they? Where are they?'"

"His breathing was getting worse and worse," Cara Poole said.

During a six-month period from November 2020 to May 2021, Sedgwick County had three or fewer ambulances for more than 144 hours, the equivalent of one full day each month for an area of more than 1,000 square miles and 500,000 people. Sedgwick County had zero ambulances available for more than 8 hours during that time, records show.

Despite Owen's long wait, he survived. But his recovery took longer than it would have with a shorter seizure, and he required 24-hour supervision for weeks following the seizure, his parents said.

"They could have given him his medicine faster, and then it would have been over," Cara Poole said.

Owen's parents had nothing but good things to say about the EMS paramedics who helped save their son.

"I do want to be clear that EMS did a great job once they got here," Cara Poole said. "I just can't believe how long it took to get here."

Missing the mark

Based on the county's own calculations, if Greyson or Owen had needed help in 2017, there would have been a nearly 89% chance an ambulance would arrive on the scene in 9 minutes or fewer anywhere in Sedgwick County.

But the likelihood of EMS showing up late has more than doubled since then, growing worse each year, according to an Eagle analysis of EMS data obtained through the Kansas Open Records Act.

In the first half of 2021, Sedgwick County EMS showed up late to the scene of life-threatening cases more than 25% of the time, compared to 11.4% in 2017.

But even those numbers don't provide the full picture of Sedgwick County EMS response time.

The Sedgwick County EMS response-time database provided through an open records request includes hundreds of calls logged as zero-second responses, such as when a resident flagged down an ambulance or someone collapsed at a sporting event or concert, which drove down the response time calculations.

Sedgwick County EMS's formula for calculating response time also largely ignores the perspective of the patient, The Eagle found. It measures its response rate from the time 911 dispatches an ambulance to when it pulls up at a scene, leaving out the time it takes to dispatch an ambulance and the time it takes an ambulance crew to contact a patient.

In Greyson's case, he waited 14 minutes and 41 seconds. But the county's formula counts the response time as 12 minutes and 9 seconds — ignoring the additional 1 minute, 40 seconds it took to dispatch an ambulance and 32 seconds it took to reach the patient.

Owen waited 23 minutes and 40 seconds, but the county's formula shaved 8 minutes and 52 seconds off in its clock, logging a response time of 14 minutes, 48 seconds. It didn't include the 7 minutes and 57 seconds he waited before an ambulance was actually dispatched or the 55 seconds before EMS made contact with him after arrival.

Not counting the patient's true wait time makes it more difficult to recognize problems within the EMS response chain, which includes 911 dispatch time.

The county's accreditation commission is considering a change that would start the clock when a resident calls for help and stop the clock when an ambulance crew reaches its patient.

Measured that way, the odds of getting an ambulance in time to make a difference in Sedgwick County have become even worse.

In 2017, EMS missed the 9-minute mark on 50.5% of life-threatening emergencies when counting the total response time. By early 2021, EMS was late to more than two out of three rescues, or 67%.

How often did Sedgwick County EMS reach a patient within 9 minutes in life-threatening emergencies?

- 2017: 49.5%
- 2018: 49.1%
- 2019: 44.1%
- 2020: 43.9%
- 2021: 32.9%

How does Sedgwick County EMS count those same calls?

- 2017: 88.6%
- 2018: 87.7%
- 2019: 85.2%
- 2020: 77.4%
- 2021: 74.6%

Misasi, deputy director of EMS operations, declined to calculate patient wait times or verify The Eagle's total response time findings based on the county's recorded times from 911 call to patient contact.

He claimed patient contact time is sometimes "an unreliable time marker" because of how it's entered into the database. But The Eagle found it comes directly from computer-aided dispatch records, the same as the other time markers used by EMS to calculate response time.

"I am willing to stipulate that your calculations are likely correct," he said.

Every minute counts

Response times, along with CPR, have long been associated with increased survival rates for people who suffer sudden cardiac arrest outside of a hospital, such as Greyson.

The best chance of survival comes when CPR is administered quickly and EMS paramedics arrive to deliver resuscitation within 6 minutes, studies have shown.

The likelihood of survival is cut in half when ambulance response time increases to between 10 and 15 minutes, with or without CPR, a new study published in the American Heart Association Journal found.

In response to questions about Greyson's death, Gallagher attempted to downplay the significance of EMS response time.

Contrary to medical research showing a strong correlation between response time and cardiac arrest survival, Gallagher said, "Currently there is little evidence to tie response time to cardiac arrest survival."

Dr. Mickey Eisenberg, a pioneer of modern emergency medicine and former medical director of the King County EMS in Seattle, has published decades of studies showing

the importance of rapid response to cardiac arrests. He declined to respond directly to Gallagher's comments, but agreed to speak to response times in general.

"There is a reason EMS vehicles and fire engines use lights and sirens," Eisenberg said. "The sooner treatment begins for critical events, the better the outcome."

Dr. Bryan McNally, the executive director of the Cardiac Arrest Registry to Enhance Survival program at Emory University School of Medicine, said cardiac arrest survival drops 7% to 10% for each minute from collapse to "definitive care," which could include defibrillation or medication.

"Every minute counts," McNally said. "A patient's chances of survival increases when you minimize the time from collapse to intervention, the time from collapse to first CPR, time from collapse to first defibrillation, time from collapse to first EMS contact. All those are important. Cardiac arrest is ultimately the most time-dependent condition you can find in the prehospital setting. Time matters."

Research published by the American Heart Association Journal in October also suggests Gallagher's conclusions are out of step with the latest research, which effectively debunked the notion that EMS response time isn't tied to survival rates.

The study, "Shortening Ambulance Response Time Increases Survival in Out-of-Hospital Cardiac Arrest", found that other important factors in cardiac arrest survival have improved as response time has gotten slower.

For example, as ambulance response time has increased, time from collapse to defibrillation has remained the same in many areas due to more firefighters and police officers carrying defibrillators.

"Again, this could contribute to the false conclusion that ambulance response time is a less important factor for patients experiencing cardiac arrest," the study says.

Medical treatment for cardiac arrest continues to improve, saving lives that otherwise would have been lost decades ago. With quicker EMS response times, even more lives could be saved, the study showed.

It projected that if ambulance response times in the United States improved to 6 minutes for cardiac arrests, 19,950 additional American lives could be saved each year.

Paramedics shortage by design

Misasi, the deputy director of EMS operations, said the response times are suffering because the department no longer has enough paramedics to fully staff its ambulances. That wasn't always the case.

Since Gallagher took over the department in 2019, at least 53 paramedics have left. As of June 1, only 18 had been replaced.

Others have been pulled off the street and placed in the training department or special units that can't transport patients, such as the ICT-1 program and single-medical responders in Clearwater and Cheney.

Gallagher and Sedgwick County Manager Tom Stolz recently called the staffing shortage "a crisis."

But the pared-down roster was by design, The Eagle's investigation found.

Sedgwick County EMS used to have enough paramedics to staff each ambulance with two, called a "dual-paramedic crew configuration."

But in 2018, then-Medical Director Gallagher signed off on an internal report authored by his predecessor that called for eliminating 35 paramedic positions and replacing them with lower-paid, less-qualified EMTs as soon as 2021. The move was expected to save \$287,735 to \$411,145 a year.

The cost-cutting maneuver aimed to staff ambulances with a cheaper paramedic/EMT crew and ditch the two-paramedic system that had been in place since 1975.

Gallagher wrote that it "would be expected to have no effect, or perhaps a positive effect, on patient care within our county."

Now, Sedgwick County EMS doesn't have enough paramedics to staff all of its ambulances.

A majority of paramedics who left the department blame Gallagher and county leaders who disregarded their concerns, according to an exit survey conducted by EMS employees and Eagle interviews.

Unlike EMTs, who can provide basic life support, paramedics are qualified to give advanced life-saving care, such as administering medications and intubating people to secure an airway.

In Sedgwick County, EMTs get paid \$29,047 to \$42,500 a year. Paramedics can make \$38,918 to \$65,913, depending on rank and experience.

Since Gallagher became director, the department had a net loss of 35 full- and part-time paramedics by May 2021, the exact number cited in the internal report he endorsed. It has gotten worse since then, The Eagle found.

Gallagher and other county leaders blame a national paramedic shortage.

"I don't have any problem getting up to our EMT target," Gallagher said. "It's doable. We can't be, like, super picky, but we can be choosy, and we can make sure that we have quality EMTs. On the paramedic side, the supply chain has gone to dirt."

Forrest Walker, a former Sedgwick County EMS paramedic, said Sedgwick County's problem is "absolutely not" the national paramedic supply.

“Imagine a patient is bleeding out, but instead of fixing that wound, you blame the American Red Cross because they don’t have enough blood to send,” Walker said. “That’s what Gallagher is doing when he blames a national paramedic shortage.

“But that’s his thing — he’s never to blame.”

Cries for help

Parents of Greyson and Owen told The Eagle their 911 calls for help were mishandled.

Greyson’s father had to dial 911 twice because the first call mysteriously dropped while he was asking instructions on administering CPR to a baby.

Sedgwick County 911 operators are trained to instruct people over the phone how to provide CPR. Records show the operator entered Greyson’s address within seconds. But no instructions were given.

Audio of the two calls obtained through the Kansas Open Records Act captures a harrowing disconnect between the urgency of the emergencies and the capacity of authorities to respond.

“My son, I need to know how to do baby CPR,” Seng said at the start of his first call for help. “Please help. Please. Please. Oh my god. Oh my god. Oh my god. I’m going to go ask for help. Please help, my son’s not breathing.”

In the recording, Seng pleads for help until the 40-second mark and the line goes dead. Twenty-six seconds later, the operator finally speaks: “Ma’am, are you there? Hello?”

Seng said he thought the operator hung up on him. Sedgwick County Emergency Communications Director Elora Forshee said she can’t explain what went wrong.

When Seng called back, he got a different operator. He again asked for help administering CPR.

“Please help me. ... I don’t know how to do it,” he said in the recording.

“Is there a defibrillator available?” the operator says. “If there’s one available, send someone to get it now.”

“A defibrillator?”

“Yes,” the operator says. “You probably don’t have one. OK, take a deep breath. I’m sending a paramedic. Stay on the line. I’ll tell you exactly what to do next.”

Seng followed the operator’s instructions, alternating between mouth-to-mouth and chest compressions for several minutes until Wichita firefighters arrived and took over CPR.

But what Greyson needed to get his heart pumping again was a shot of adrenaline, which could be administered only by a paramedic, not a firefighter.

Miscommunication

Owen's mother also called twice after 911 failed to dispatch an ambulance. "There was just no one coming until I called back," she said.

Sedgwick County Emergency Communications did not provide audio from Poole's second call, despite it being in the time frame requested in the Eagle's records request.

Poole reported that her son fell from his treehouse and was unresponsive. In other circumstances, 911 dispatches an ambulance immediately to life-threatening calls.

But in Owen's case, 911 waited nearly 8 minutes.

Forshee said it took that long because it was unclear whether Owen needed an ambulance.

That explanation contradicts what's heard on the 911 audio. Owen's babysitter called 911 about 32 seconds after Cara Poole's call.

The babysitter told the 911 operator that Owen was conscious but unresponsive after hitting his head. She said his pupils weren't dilating correctly. Three minutes into the conversation, the dispatcher said he was sending paramedics.

But records show 911 didn't dispatch an ambulance until 7 minutes and 57 seconds after the original call.

Undiagnosed problem

Sedgwick County officials allowed the problems with Sedgwick County EMS response times to go undiagnosed for two years without public scrutiny.

In the past, Sedgwick County EMS directors posted response times on the county's website, showcasing whether the department had been meeting its accreditation standards.

Scott Hadley, Sedgwick County EMS director from 2010 to 2018, said providing those numbers helped hold him accountable and allowed the department to maintain public trust.

"To me, that's being transparent," Hadley said. "That's showing the public, good or bad, it got put out there. These are our targets, these are our goals, and are we achieving those or not. And if we're not, why are we not achieving those goals? What do we need to do to achieve it? I believe that's the right thing to do."

That practice was abandoned when Gallagher took over the department in 2019, as response times grew slower.

"I'll admit it wasn't a front-burner item for me," Gallagher said during a June 1 interview with The Eagle. "When I first got started, there was plenty to work on. ... And while we have yet to put out our first one, we've been working with our data analysts

to make sure that we put stuff out that is both technically accurate and also consumable. ... My hope is that in the next couple of weeks we'll be able to do that.”

“We certainly don't want it to come across as if it's not being reported or trying to hide something. That's certainly not the case,” he added.

No such information had been posted online as of July 10, 39 days after the interview.

When Sedgwick County Commissioner Jim Howell pressed for response times this spring, Stolz, the county manager, initially rejected his request.

“Gallagher and his team are trying to improve the quality of EMS service and get away from the quantitative numbers game used historically which did not tell the whole story and value of the EMS department,” Stolz wrote Howell in an April 14 email.

Howell was later provided a copy of the full EMS database for 2020 and 2021, after threatening to submit an open records request.

If a resident wants to see response-time data from Sedgwick County EMS, they would have to submit a Kansas Open Records Act request and pay \$90. Then they would have to do the math themselves with incomplete data.

When The Eagle made its request, Sedgwick County deleted basic information about EMS rescues from a copy of its Excel file recording response times, claiming it had to remove ZIP codes, addresses and city names to protect patient privacy under the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, or HIPAA. It also removed patient ages, but only for patients over age 89.

During The Eagle's investigation, Sedgwick County EMS officials were slow to acknowledge slower response times. But it's unclear how closely they were tracking them.

When The Eagle asked Sedgwick County officials to compare EMS response times to the Eagle's findings, it took a week for the county to run the calculations and confirm The Eagle's numbers were correct.

“We continuously study and adjust our operations, with the resources we have, to meet our goals,” Misasi, EMS deputy director of operations, wrote in an email.

“Unfortunately, as you can see in this data, our system is not currently capable of meeting these internally-based goals for (Sedgwick County or the city of Wichita), nor has it been since before 2017 for urban areas and 2020 for the entire county.”

As slow as Sedgwick County EMS has become at responding to emergencies, its response times pale in comparison to the time it has taken county leadership to recognize there's a problem — despite warnings from frontline employees.

“The current state of the EMS organization was literally forecast by employees over the past two years,” Mitchell, the paramedic, said. “And it was 100 percent avoidable.”



Travis Heying/The Wichita Eagle

A patient is unloaded from an ambulance outside of Wesley Medical Center in 2020.

County EMS workers disillusioned, say relationship with leaders too broken to fix

By Michael Stavola and Chance Swaim | The Wichita Eagle | July 12, 2021

Wichita once had one of the best EMS departments in the Midwest, pioneering resuscitation techniques and winning national awards for saving lives.

Sedgwick County EMS employees say the current department has been reduced to “a laughingstock at a national level” and “a joke.”

The massive shift came under Dr. John Gallagher, who was named director in 2019.

Since then, more than a third of Gallagher’s original workforce has left, leaving Sedgwick County with fewer ambulances on the street and dangerously slower response times.

Sedgwick County EMS is now a deeply divided and disillusioned department, a Wichita Eagle investigation found. Rank-and-file employees say their relationship with EMS administrators is beyond repair.

Two closed-door meetings three months ago illustrate the depth of the rift. In late April, more than 120 EMS employees attended a meeting where they urged Sedgwick County Manager Tom Stolz and Deputy County Manager Rusty Leeds to remove Gallagher. The Eagle obtained audio of both meetings from multiple sources.

Thirty-nine employees addressed Stolz and Leeds during the two meetings.

“The employees in attendance are stating, explicitly, that we can no longer bear the burden of continuing mismanagement and demand the immediate removal of Dr. Gallagher as both our service and medical director,” said Brendan McGreevy, Sedgwick County paramedic.

Several employees in the training division also called for the removal of Dr. Carolina Pereira, deputy medical director hired by Gallagher in March 2020.

At the meetings, EMS employees took turns describing a miserable workplace with belittling bosses, discrimination and perilously vague protocols that are driving away experienced paramedics. They also warned of slow response times, ambulance shutdowns and a disregard for human life.

“The Gallagher regime doesn’t care,” said Cole Mitchell, a paramedic who has been with the county for 15 years. “Everyone is expendable.”

At the core of the fraught relationship between Gallagher and EMS workers is a decision he made in 2019 not to transport a man with a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head, even though the patient had a pulse and was breathing for several hours.

National EMS commentators have called the decision “a Titanic (expletive) up.”

Stolz, who sat through nearly four hours of unified opposition to Gallagher from past and present EMS employees, told the group it was powerful to hear from them.

Stolz promised the employees immunity for their comments and that there would be no retribution by the county for anything they said. He also told them he would be sending the audio to Sedgwick County commissioners. He insisted they remain professional no matter how extreme the leadership.

“Whether Adolf Hitler is running the organization, I have faith that this group is professional,” he said of the EMS employees. “But yet at the same time, we owe you a work environment that is professional.”

Gallagher acknowledged in an interview with The Eagle that his leadership style doesn’t “jibe with everyone” but said he has no plans to resign.

“I intend to be here for years,” he said.

Pereira, deputy medical director, turned in her 90-day notice of resignation on Wednesday. Pereira reportedly said she was “scared to do her job” and needed to leave, citing a work environment where EMS employees “are allowed to have secret meetings with commissioner(s) and are able to send things to the media or place on social media with no discussion, communication, or ramification.”

Old wounds

Today’s troubles with Sedgwick County EMS started two years ago, when a coalition of powerful local authorities successfully pushed Gallagher’s promotion to EMS director against the wishes of more than 100 street-level EMS employees.

EMS employees have not forgotten.

“The wounds from 2019 remain until this day, and are very vivid in the memories of many of the employees seated before you,” Caleb Yoder, an EMS paramedic, said at one of the April meetings.

An Eagle investigation found that in the months leading up to Gallagher’s promotion, those same authorities helped downplay Gallagher’s decision to deny an ambulance to the man who shot himself. His handling of that patient has led to a state investigation that could put his medical license and the careers of seven first responders in jeopardy.

The Kansas Board of EMS has asked the Kansas Board of Healing Arts to launch an investigation into Gallagher’s handling of the call, potentially endangering his license to practice medicine in Kansas.

The controversial case has proven to be a breaking point for many EMS employees, who say they no longer trust Gallagher and that working under him requires them to compromise their personal integrity.

“What once was a progressive and innovative service that defined current practice has now become an embarrassment, not only locally but nationally, because of Dr. Gallagher’s actions,” said Ryan Kilby, an EMS paramedic. “He has created distrust between the public and our organization, he has put the health and well being of our employees and community at risk.”

“We are all appalled by that decision,” said Brad Crowe, another paramedic. “None of us in this room would have made that decision (not to transport the patient). And we can’t understand how that happened.”

“And I don’t understand how the county leadership can’t make the decision to put us out of our misery and get rid of this guy,” Crowe said.

Sedgwick County Commissioners, EMS employees and the general public were kept in the dark about the details for nearly two years. During that time, the commission approved a 5-year contract worth more than \$1 million with Gallagher while more than a third of his original workforce left the department.

Gallagher's promotion followed several months of protest by EMS employees, who gathered more than 100 signatures endorsing a letter sent to commissioners that raised concerns about Gallagher's fitness to lead and asked for an open and competitive hiring process.

Instead, Stolz promoted Gallagher, who had been the county's medical director, putting him in charge of a \$21 million budget and more than 200 employees.

County Commissioner Jim Howell said if the details of the gunshot patient's case had been disclosed earlier, Gallagher likely wouldn't have been promoted. He told The Eagle he wants Gallagher to be placed on administrative leave, based on complaints by EMS employees and a report issued by the Kansas Board of EMS that called for the Kansas Board of Healing Arts to investigate Gallagher.

The Kansas Board of EMS case could have a hearing as early as October. The Kansas Board of Healing Arts is barred by state law from disclosing complaints and investigations, which can take months or years to conclude.

"I believe the county has been largely dismissive of the findings of that report," Howell said. "We can't wait until all of the investigations are over to take action. It appears the county is trying to sweep this under the rug."

"Unsalvageable"

The case at issue involved a 31-year-old patient who had apparently shot himself in the head on June 19, 2019. Response time was not a problem that day. Within minutes, EMS determined the man had a pulse and was breathing.

Sedgwick County EMS protocols call for paramedics to transport patients who have a pulse and are breathing to an emergency room. But Gallagher ordered Sedgwick County EMS and Wichita Fire Department first responders to stand down and wait for the man to die.

Ascension Via Christi St. Francis hospital was a mile away.

One hour after the shooting, the patient had a strong pulse and continued breathing. But Gallagher, who came to assess the situation in person, decided the patient was "unsalvageable," a summary order by the Kansas Board of EMS says.

Gallagher ordered EMS paramedics to clear the scene and leave the patient with the Wichita Police Department, to whom he gave instructions to call him back when the patient "concluded dying."

Police officers refused and returned to their vehicles. Stephen Runyan, a Wichita Fire Department EMT on the scene, said he wasn't comfortable with Gallagher's suggestion to leave the patient, according to the order. Firefighters remained with the patient after Gallagher ordered EMS to leave.

The man was left on the floor of his downtown Wichita apartment for five hours. At times, he appeared to be in pain, “groaning loudly” while emergency medical providers stood by, “watching and doing nothing,” according to the summary.

During that time, Gallagher approved two maximum doses of ketamine, totaling 1,000 mg, for pain management.

The patient — still alive — was later covered with a white sheet and taken to hospice, not the emergency room, where he died more than 10 ½ hours after the shooting.

Gallagher’s role in that decision became public for the first time in March when The Eagle reported the details, which had previously been toned-down by county management and the Medical Society of Sedgwick County in emails to Sedgwick County Commissioners, records show.

County leaders sanitize details

The day after the suicide, Assistant County Manager of Public Safety Rusty Leeds and Stolz, the county manager, seized control of the narrative, emails obtained by The Eagle show.

Leeds and Stolz had spearheaded the campaign to promote Gallagher to EMS director through a merger between the Office of the Medical Director and EMS.

In a series of emails sent to county commissioners, Leeds and Stolz presented a cleaned-up version of how the patient was handled.

It failed to mention any details about the man’s apparent suffering for hours on the floor of an apartment instead of an emergency room a mile away.

“Yesterday there was an incident,” an email from Leeds begins, “currently under investigation as a suicide by firearm, in west Wichita.

“The head injury was identified as unsurvivable by the Medical Director. In consultation with the ER physician, it was determined that the body should not be delivered to the ER.”

The Kansas Board of EMS report makes no mention of any discussion between Gallagher and any emergency room physicians. It notes that he spoke with a hospice nurse.

“Arrangements were made and the body was moved to an alternative facility to manage the body until the reflexive functions ceased,” Leeds wrote.

“It became controversial because the timeline from time of call to body removal was about 4.5 hours,” Leeds added. “The Medical Director is developing protocol to manage these rare occurrences in a timely, structured manner going forward.”

“In the interim, should a similar situation occur, the body will be moved to the most appropriate care facility if reflexive functions do not cease in a short period of time,” Leeds wrote.

Leeds said news coverage could follow but that the county’s strategic communications department was managing the situation.

Stolz sent a follow-up email assuring commissioners that Gallagher simply validated the assessment of EMS staff at the scene.

However, it was actually EMS staff who asked Gallagher to assess the patient, the Kansas Board of EMS investigation found.

Medical society backs Gallagher

After the suicide call, Gallagher turned to the Medical Society of Sedgwick County for a review of the case.

Gallagher is a member of the Medical Society and serves on its EMS physicians advisory committee. In a closed-door process, that same committee reviewed the suicide case at his request.

“One of the advantages in the peer-review system is the people who are involved already know the case,” Gallagher said in a June interview. “And so you have more information than anybody who could ever review it, so people go into peer-review confident of the outcome.”

Gallagher said he doesn’t think his membership on the committee that investigated him is a conflict of interest. “That’s the way physician peer-review works,” he said. “I mean, hence the name.”

“I know there’s been allegations of, ‘Oh, it was a handpicked group of all of Gallagher’s buddies’ and all this, and while I do know the people on the committee ... it’s a committee I can’t vote on,” he said.

No one will say what information the committee reviewed, but the foundation of the Kansas Board of EMS’s findings was Wichita police body-camera footage.

A month after the patient’s death, Phillip Brownlee, the executive director of the Sedgwick County Medical Society and a former Eagle editorial page editor, sent County Commissioners a two-sentence summary that attempted to clear Gallagher of any wrongdoing.

The summary said the Medical Society had completed an assessment of the EMS care and a peer-review of Gallagher. It found “the EMS providers delivered appropriate care within their protocols and their scope of practice,” and “the EMS physicians provided care that fully meets the standard of care.” No further details were provided.

At the time, the Medical Society was also actively lobbying commissioners in favor of the merger that placed Gallagher atop Sedgwick County EMS, The Eagle found.

Brownlee, on behalf of the Medical Society of Sedgwick County, had pitched the idea as one that would make dollars and sense, two days before the suicide call.

“Having a physician lead the merged system could help ensure that operations make the most medical sense,” Brownlee’s letter to commissioners said. “It could also better inform (Medical Society of Sedgwick County) physicians about the budgetary limitations facing (Sedgwick County EMS), helping ensure that medical recommendations are made in a cost-effective manner.”

Brownlee told an Eagle reporter he didn’t think there was a conflict of interest in the committee investigating an incident that involved one of its members. The Medical Society does not have a conflict of interest policy, according to its nonprofit tax form.

“This is the process that is used,” he said. “We have a committee that oversees EMS. This is what they do. These are professionals. They take their jobs extremely seriously.”

Neither Brownlee nor Gallagher would provide a list of physicians who reviewed the case.

“Doctor untouchable”?

The suicide call gained national attention within the EMS community, with paramedics across the country decrying Gallagher’s handling of the case on social media and national figures weighing in.

EMS law expert Davit Givot wrote a column on the case for EMS1.com, saying it appeared Gallagher acted properly, based on the findings of the Medical Society of Sedgwick County. But he couldn’t say the same for the EMS providers who followed Gallagher’s orders.

“As much as I want to tell you that I believe the EMS crew acted reasonably in following Dr. Gallagher’s order, I simply cannot,” he wrote, adding that the first two rules of EMS are “first do no harm” and “err on the side of the patient.”

The Overrun, a popular EMS podcast, dedicated an entire episode to the suicide call, titled “What the actual, Sedgwick?”

Co-hosts Ed Bauter and Dan Schwester, both experienced EMS paramedics, were highly critical of the Sedgwick County response, calling it “astonishingly bad judgment.”

“It was a systemic failure, from the top down, and the accountability falls on the people who were ordered to do things by their medical director,” Bauter said.

A Wichita emergency room nurse, who asked not to be named so she could speak freely without fear of retribution from her employer, said she believed the suicide call has created massive distrust in the emergency rooms around town where Gallagher works.

Gallagher's contract with the county allows him to work six days each month as a physician at Ascension Via Christi and Wesley Medical Center, which pay him an undisclosed amount of remuneration on top of his \$222,142.65 base salary from Sedgwick County.

Nurses rearrange their schedules to avoid working with him and doctors complain he doesn't clean up his messes, she said. She said she thought the amount of ketamine approved by Gallagher was inappropriate and appeared to be an attempt to hasten the patient's death.

"That amount of ketamine would kill me," she said.

Gallagher defended the two maximum doses. "That's the right dose for the patient," he said.

She called Gallagher "Doctor Untouchable."

"The difference between John Gallagher and God is, God knows he's not John Gallagher," she said.

"Nobody wants to work for him, because they don't trust him," she said. "I don't respect him, I don't trust him and I don't want him on my team. No nurses want to work under him. I can't believe that Ascension and Wesley — I can't believe his privileges haven't been revoked."

The nurse said a decline in Sedgwick County EMS service means fewer patients reach the emergency room, where they have a better chance of being saved. "People are dying in the field," she said. "I'm wondering how many lives have been lost because of it, and now that we don't have enough paramedics to cover the calls, how many more are going to die."

A broken relationship

The decade before Gallagher's promotion, average paramedic turnover in Sedgwick County EMS hovered around 10%, county records show.

From 2011 to 2018, EMS lost an average of 17.5 full-time employees a year, including EMTs and paramedics.

Those retention numbers were well above the national average. But that changed after the county merged EMS with the Office of the Medical Director. Separations have nearly doubled since Gallagher's promotion, with 68 separations in less than two years.

"Right now, our responders are broken, physically and mentally," EMS Crew Leader Kyler Konda, a paramedic, told county leaders in April.

As of June 7, 47 full-time and six part-time paramedics had left EMS since Gallagher's promotion.

Since then, at least five more paramedics have handed in resignations.

Former Sedgwick County EMS Capt. Cat Edison, an 8-year veteran paramedic and crew leader, is one of them.

On a Friday in June, Edison helped save a Wichita firefighter's life after he suffered a cardiac arrest at the scene of a house fire in west Wichita. The following Monday, she handed in her resignation letter.

Edison said she quit because of Gallagher, who she said routinely "talks down" to street-level EMS employees.

"Nobody was ever as smart as him," Edison said. "Nobody was ever as good as him. You couldn't have a conversation with him without having him making it known that whatever your opinion was, [it] didn't matter as much as his. You just never felt heard."

Jaime McHugh, a 12-year paramedic who quit the same week as Edison, expressed similar concerns about Gallagher in a separate interview.

"I also feel like I have no voice here," McHugh said. "(Gallagher's) made it very, very clear with his decisions and his leadership that we do not matter here. We are not worth anything to him."

Brownlee, executive director of the Sedgwick County Medical Society, said Gallagher is "extremely well-respected in the emergency medicine physician community."

When asked for a peer of Gallagher's to speak with, Brownlee recommended Dr. John McMaster. Sedgwick County Commission Chairman Pete Meitzner had also recommended McMaster as someone who could speak highly of Gallagher.

McMaster is the chair of the Medical Society's EMS Physicians Advisory Committee, which cleared Gallagher and seven employees of any wrongdoing in the 2019 suicide call.

When reached for comment about Gallagher's character, McMaster hung up on an Eagle reporter.

Jennifer Hopkins said she worked with Gallagher at St. Francis before recently leaving to take a job as a traveling nurse. She said she liked him as a person, but not a coworker.

"I think most people really truly didn't care for him," Hopkins said. "Personally, I would say that he maybe seemed a little arrogant."

Sedgwick County EMS employees said they have also lost trust in the medical judgment of Gallagher and Pereira, a deputy medical director hired in March 2020 to improve training and protocols.

Pereira handed in her 90-day notice on Wednesday.

Zachariah Marrs, who is an EMT part-time while finishing paramedic school, told county leaders that he doesn't trust the two EMS doctors.

“I would not want my family member to go to a hospital that was currently staffed by either (Dr.) Pereira or Dr. Gallagher,” Marrs said. “If I was given the choice, and I knew that they had to go to a hospital, I would ask which doctor was in charge that day. And that is not a stance that anybody in here should ever have to say about someone who is supposed to be our leader.”

Days after the second April meeting with EMS staff, Stolz announced he planned to hire auditing firm Allen, Gibbs & Houlik to assess EMS leadership and protocols, a move to restore trust in county leadership.

But EMS employees immediately raised concerns about ties between AGH CEO Paul Allen, Stolz and Meitzner. All three work as officers or members of the Greater Wichita Partnership, a quasi-public organization focused on economic growth.

Mitch Hansen, EMS shift commander, explained it in an email to Howell: “There is no trust at this present moment with any decisions at the county level ... We keep hearing the same tune, same song, and seeing the same dance.”

By May 12, Stolz had backed away from the auditing firm. He instead suggested arbitration between EMS workers, Gallagher and Paul Misasi, deputy director of EMS operations, to “work their way through the issues” with an outside mediator, according to an email.

“Arbitration would insinuate that the relationship between Dr. Gallagher, Mr. Misasi and the employees of Sedgwick County EMS is repairable; which it is not,” EMS Capt. Brendan McGreevy wrote in a May 12 email to Stolz.

“As we stated, in both meetings held on the 26th and 28th of April, the employees of Sedgwick County EMS gave testimony and clearly stated a vote of no confidence in the clinical, operational, and administrative abilities of Dr. Gallagher, Dr. Pereira, and Mr. Misasi to lead the organization.

“A lack of leadership and the creation of a toxic, volatile, and unsafe work environment prevent the consensus of our colleagues the ability to negotiate any terms except the immediate termination or resignation of Dr. Gallagher, Dr. Pereira, and Mr. Misasi,” McGreevy wrote.

Two days later, the county hired local law firm Hite, Fanning & Honeyman to investigate.



Jaime Green/The Wichita Eagle
A Sedgwick County EMS ambulance drives south on 167th Street West near Eisenhower High School on May 16, 2021.

Sedgwick County leaders disregarded warnings by EMS workers from the beginning

By Chance Swaim and Michael Stavola | The Wichita Eagle | July 13, 2021

Depending on who you talk to in Sedgwick County government, troubles within EMS are either ominous or overblown.

Multiple EMS employees have warned county leaders that Dr. John Gallagher is driving away paramedics and putting lives at risk. The majority of county commissioners aren't convinced and say they are waiting for the findings of an outside law firm's audit before deciding whether he should stay as the director.

Commissioner Jim Howell said they already have enough information to place Gallagher on administrative leave until all of the investigations are completed.

Besides the outside law firm's review, Gallagher is at the center of two other potential investigations, one with the Kansas Board of EMS and one with the Kansas Board of Healing Arts, related to his handling of a suicide call in 2019.

"Every day that we wait, we're losing more paramedics," Howell said.

"This appears to be Sedgwick County leaders digging-in against overwhelming data," Howell said of suffering response times and a department in disarray. "It feels more political than data-driven. I think anybody would look at this data, and they would make a pretty common sense conclusion."

The Wichita Eagle found Sedgwick County leaders have bungled attempts to reconcile conflicts within the EMS department, allowing an interdepartmental squabble to turn into a public health crisis.

A county commissioner reportedly threw away an employee petition. Another commissioner refused to listen to an audio record of their concerns. County management didn't inform commissioners of the potential gravity of Gallagher's decision to deny a suicidal man an ambulance before they approved a 5-year contract with him.

The contract was approved on the consent agenda without public comment or debate by commissioners, fueling mistrust. And when the county moved to review problems within EMS, it initially chose an auditing firm with loose ties to two county officials, a move that inflamed county employees.

"The onus of this failed experiment falls as much on you as it does Dr. Gallagher and his executive staff," EMS Capt. Cole Mitchell told County Manager Tom Stolz and Assistant County Manager Rusty Leeds at a meeting in April.

"The fact is, you guys took factual and credible information given to you, you ignored it, you manipulated it and even borderline intimidated those who brought it forward, all to fit a narrative. You knowingly and willingly made a bad decision."

County commissioners split

Sedgwick County Commissioners don't agree on a solution to the EMS crisis. Political rancor between Howell and Commissioners Pete Meitzner and David Dennis has impeded a civil discussion from the bench.

All commissioners told The Eagle they want EMS worker morale to improve.

Howell said he has a list of "action items" the county should do immediately: separate the EMS from the Office of the Medical Director, name an interim EMS director and an interim medical director, and begin a national search for permanent replacements.

"If we did those things, I think paramedics would come back," Howell said. "We would stop the hemorrhaging immediately."

Howell, whose daughter-in-law works for EMS, has consistently pushed for more data on EMS performance under Gallagher, but he said he was dismissed by County Manager Tom Stolz, who called his requests “a witch hunt.”

“I believe the county has been dismissive and strangely reluctant to review the decisions made in the past,” Howell said.

Howell, a Republican, said it has been difficult to get support from other commissioners for political reasons. The two members of the board in his political party, Meitzner and Dennis, have been the strongest supporters of Gallagher and have each floated privatization as a solution if Sedgwick County EMS continues to struggle, a proposition Howell strongly opposes.

Meitzner and Dennis have doubts that there’s any problem with EMS services.

Meitzner said he hasn’t heard complaints about EMS from doctors or the general public about response times.

“In city and county government, the citizens are really good at letting you know if there’s something wrong,” he said. “In this case, the citizens and the doctors I know, the citizens and the doctors are very happy with the service. They don’t call up and say I’m happy with the service, but they would sure call up if they were complaining.”

When Cara Poole, whose son suffered a seizure and waited 24 minutes for an ambulance, wrote an email to Dennis with concerns about response times, he told her that the slow response to her son’s emergency didn’t have anything to do with EMS staffing levels.

“This was not an EMS staffing issue although those who want us to fire the current Medical Director (Gallagher), always point to anything they can to bolster their case and discredit EMS,” he wrote in a June 17 email.

Meitzner questioned Howell’s motives, suggesting he’s only interested because he has a family member who works in EMS. “I have no idea if that means anything,” Meitzner said.

Troubles with EMS have gotten the attention of the private sector. In late April, a representative from Global Medical Response, parent company of American Medical Response, wrote to Meitzner saying the company had been “following the current issues” and “staffing problems” at Sedgwick County EMS and wanted to share a proposal.

Meitzner and Stolz later held a teleconference with GMR representatives. Both said it was informational in nature and did not involve any negotiations.

“How can we not have a plan B?” Meitzner said in an interview with The Eagle. “That would be irresponsible, unless they can resolve it. I’m hoping they can resolve it, personally. Maybe it can go back to a manager-led department; maybe it’s still a medical-led department.”

Stolz, in a separate interview, said he would prefer not to privatize EMS.

“I would love to keep the current model that we have and make it work,” Stolz said. “But if we just continue to hemorrhage paramedics then we’ll have to look at a solution to try to help the people on the street keep their head above water and serve the people.”

Meitzner said the staffing crisis in EMS isn’t unique, as other county departments struggle to fill positions. He also posited that the pandemic has led to a worsening of the situation.

“You know, with COVID and the money that people are getting for not working, it can put a strain everywhere,” he said.

Dennis told The Eagle he’s waiting for the law firm’s findings to form an opinion on what should change.

“I don’t know what it’s going to recommend at this point and time,” Dennis said. “I can’t tell you until I read the audit what my decision is going to be moving forward. It could be anything, from privatizing the whole thing to change of leadership.”

The two Democrats on the commission, Lacey Cruse and Sarah Lopez, have signaled that they are also waiting for the investigation findings before deciding whether to push for a leadership change.

In the meantime, Cruse said she’s pushing for a pay raise for EMS employees and would like to see more mental health care available to them.

“Right now, our EMS employees have an opportunity to see a counselor three times,” Cruse said. “It’s free. We pay for the service for all of them, but not all of them use that. And so how can we take those unused visits and give it to the people who are going to see the value in seeing a therapist.”

Lopez, who joined the commission in January, said she doesn’t know the entire backstory of Gallagher’s promotion. But she did attend one of two closed-door staff meetings in late April, along with Howell, where EMS employees called on county leaders to fire Gallagher.

“There’s some real problems that need to be addressed and need to be fixed,” she said. “But there has to be a process in how we do this. I wish that process would have started and played out before now, but that hasn’t been the case. So it’s to the point where there is no middle ground that we can get to a compromise. ... We’ve crossed that line already.”

Years of pushback

Sedgwick County EMS employees have told The Eagle they no longer feel comfortable approaching some county commissioners for help.

When paramedics brought a petition signed by nearly half the department to Meitzner, he threw it in the trash, multiple witnesses have said.

The petition questioned Gallagher's honesty, experience, leadership and transparency and asked for an open search to fill the vacancy left open nearly a year after former EMS Director Scott Hadley retired. It had been reportedly signed by more than 100 street-level EMS workers.

"He kind of berated us for being there," EMS Capt. Brendan McGreevy told The Eagle. "He said something along the lines of, he had been in charge of a Fortune 500 company and had never had low-level employees come to him with issues like this.

"That's when he proceeded to say that 'this is why I have the county manager, so I don't have to deal with issues like this,'" McGreevy said.

After an awkward silence, the paramedics got up to leave, McGreevy said. Meitzner followed them out of his office "with the letter in his hand and threw it in the trash in the lobby. And then he went back into his office."

Meitzner said he doesn't recall doing that. "If you hand me something, I'm not a guy that goes — I don't do that."

"In all my years of service, I always respected the departments, the managers, and the employees," Meitzner said.

Former director's warning

Hadley, the former EMS director who worked alongside Gallagher, said he also tried to warn officials against promoting Gallagher when he retired in 2018.

"I told them not to experiment with Sedgwick County EMS and change the current model and ... do not put Dr. John Gallagher in charge of the service," he said. "That was known to many people on many different occasions in discussions that I had. I didn't record those conversations so I can't produce any proof that I had those discussions with anybody. They can all deny that that happened, but it did."

During the April meetings, Stolz denied that Hadley told him not to hire Gallagher. Hadley said that's a lie.

Hadley said, before his retirement in October 2018, he expressed his concerns to then-County Manager Michael Scholes; Stolz, who at the time was a deputy county manager; Leeds, assistant county manager; Commissioner David Dennis; and former Commissioner Michael O'Donnell.

"In my opinion of being in EMS for 30 years and looking at other characteristics of leaders in a department, I believe Dr. John Gallagher ... has a narcissistic leadership style, meaning he is self-serving, he really doesn't have any empathy for others, he likes people around him that agree with him and anybody with a dissenting opinion is either ignored or they have hostility back towards them or some other type of repercussion," Hadley said.

“I believe what you’ve seen manifest since my departure over the two years that he’s been there, you now see a culture that is toxic. You see people leaving at an unprecedented rate. They are losing medics by the day.”

Dennis, in a June interview with The Eagle, blamed Hadley for the low morale in the department, even though he’s been gone for nearly three years.

“Hadley poisoned the well as he was leaving,” Dennis said. “After he left, he even came back and was still poisoning the well here because he didn’t like Gallagher and that is carry over from what we are having today.”

“He is (still) working with his good old boys down there trying to discredit Dr. Gallagher,” Dennis said.

Dennis, who was chairman of the County Commission in 2018 and 2019, said the department had problems with sexual harassment under Hadley.

When asked about specifics, Dennis said, “I don’t get into personnel issues.”

Hadley said those are wild allegations.

“That is just, wow,” he said. “I don’t even know what he is talking about.”

Stolz, the county manager, said he had received complaints from employees “about some sexual harassment issues going on.”

“People were frightened to report it. There was a good old boy system,” Stolz said.

Stolz said those complaints factored into the decision to promote Gallagher.

“No sooner did we do that, we had a couple of sexual harassment complaints that actually came up just a few weeks after we did the merger, and we actually took some job actions on people,” Stolz said.

Dennis said he’s unsure if it’s a majority of employees with concerns about Gallagher or just a few.

At the same time, he has refused to listen to a recording of the meetings where dozens of EMS employees laid out their complaints against Gallagher. EMS workers had asked that Dennis, Meitzner, Gallagher and his executive team not be invited to the meeting so they could speak freely.

“If they don’t want me involved, then I will stay back out of it,” Dennis said. “I know they recorded it, but I didn’t go back and listen to the recordings because at that point it appeared that they didn’t want me to know anything.”

Contract on consent agenda

The Sedgwick County Commission ultimately backed the decision to promote Gallagher at an Aug. 20, 2019, staff meeting.

At that meeting, commissioners Dennis and Cruse framed the EMS employees' complaints about Gallagher as resistance to change, ignoring the petition signed by 104 employees — a majority of the frontline ambulance workers.

"I know change is hard, but it's time to rip this bandage off and make a decision," Dennis said.

Cruse said she believed Gallagher could improve his relationship with employees.

"I did meet with a lot of boots-on-the-ground folks, and I heard some concerns," Cruse said. "And I want to say that those concerns were heard, but ... we do have to move forward. Change is tough."

Commissioners weren't the only ones who dismissed the petition.

In emails to EMS crew leaders, Stolz attempted to discredit the effort — nicknamed "Project Street" by organizers.

Stolz said some employees had told him that they felt coerced into signing the letter, "so that (letter) doesn't hold much water to me," he wrote to paramedic Caleb Yoder. "That is not how we treat employees."

One of the organizers, former paramedic April Calaway, strongly disputes anyone was coerced. She said signing was completely voluntary.

Stolz told The Eagle "a handful of people" complained in 2019 that they were being asked to attend meetings and sign the petition letter. He said he promised them anonymity and would not provide their names.

Although Gallagher took over the role of EMS director in August 2019, it didn't become official until Dec. 4 of that year, when the Sedgwick County Commission unanimously approved a 5-year contract worth more than \$1 million, with two 2-year automatic renewals.

Gallagher's contract was buried in the consent agenda and passed without any debate or public comment. It came up for a vote on the same day Howell, the only commissioner to question the promotion, missed his first commission meeting in six years, which he had pre-arranged months earlier.

"I can assure you that had I been there, I would have pulled it off the consent agenda and you better believe I would have had questions," Howell said. "That's an extremely generous contract. I'm not sure we have ever had another county employee contract like that."

Stolz said Gallagher's future at Sedgwick County largely hinges on the audit findings of the outside law firm, which has been interviewing EMS employees since June.

"It's important to me that people feel respected," Stolz said. "And if they're not feeling respected, I need to understand why they're not. And we'll do whatever we have to do to help them feel respected in the workplace."

“A lot of what I hear, I want to validate,” Stolz said. “But one of the things I have a hard time reconciling is this guy is not qualified. To me, on paper, he’s highly qualified. Now, the question is, does that extrapolate into leadership and human interaction? Well, that’s what we’re looking into right now.”

Gallagher said he welcomes the investigation.

“I think it’s incredibly important that we make sure that they (EMS employees) feel heard, and that they feel valued, right,” he said. “We’ve definitely made changes within this timeframe, and that’s been hard. We’ve got some people that want to turn back the clock.”

On June 12, Gallagher sent out a warning to Brownlee and two physicians on the Medical Society of Sedgwick County committee that reviewed the suicide case, saying that The Eagle would soon be publishing a story on EMS.

He assured them the current controversy would soon blow over.

“As before, this is an effort spearheaded by a single commissioner and a group of employees who are trying to dismantle our new physician-led model,” Gallagher wrote. “Fortunately, the EMS department leadership has excellent support from the county, including the other four commissioners, the county manager’s office, the county legal and HR departments ... and we are confident that this too shall pass.”



Courtesy of Sedgwick County

Mary Arterburn, mother of retired Wichita Police Officer Brian Arterburn, addressed the Sedgwick County Commission on Wednesday, calling for swift action on Sedgwick County EMS Director Dr. John Gallagher.

With removal of Sedgwick County EMS director John Gallagher, manager Stolz seeks changes

By Chance Swaim and Michael Stavola | The Wichita Eagle | July 21, 2021

Sedgwick County Manager Tom Stolz removed Dr. John Gallagher from his role as EMS director on Wednesday following a Wichita Eagle investigation into slow response times and a staff revolt against Gallagher's leadership.

Stolz also apologized for the delay, saying he wished he would have been more proactive at communicating with EMS employees about their concerns with Gallagher in the past two years.

"The specific decision to remove Dr. Gallagher as director also solely rests with me," he said. "I did so after much thought, investigation and proper due diligence. I apologize for what many saw as a delay in this matter, but it is important to me to be fair and to

not succumb to newspaper and social media pressure or even pressure from individual commissioners.”

Stolz announced his decision at the end of Wednesday’s Sedgwick County Commission meeting after a one-hour executive session “for consultation regarding matters deemed privileged in the attorney-client relationship to discuss matters involving a departmental investigation and employee contractual matters.”

County leaders have been waiting for the results of an audit of EMS leadership and protocols to make a decision about Gallagher’s future. Stolz told The Eagle he had not been given an executive summary of the audit by Wednesday.

Along with Gallagher’s ouster, Stolz also announced a series of sweeping changes aimed at improving Sedgwick County EMS.

“As we move forward, there are still issues that need to be addressed within EMS and do not immediately dissolve with an interim director,” Stolz said. “We still have a critical paramedic shortage. . . . We still need to address compensation as other communities quickly hire away our talent for better pay as we struggle to keep our local talent.”

Since Gallagher’s promotion to director in August 2019 — against the wishes of a majority of EMS staff — a third of the department has left, causing ambulance shutdowns and dangerously slow response times. This year, Sedgwick County EMS reached fewer than one in three patients within 9 minutes, a national standard for EMS response.

Stolz said the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the problem, making it more difficult to communicate in-person with EMS workers.

“In hindsight, I wish I would have proactively sent a survey or made some type of outreach to employees,” he said. “That was a mistake on my part.”

Stolz said the county will take the following steps to improve EMS service in the Wichita area:

- Name an interim director as soon as possible
- Separate EMS operations and the Office of the Medical Director
- Promote Dr. Carolina Pereira, who turned in her resignation earlier this month, to medical director until September. During that time, the county would search for a contracted medical director to serve as a stopgap until the county stands up a competitive search for a permanent medical director.
- Create an EMS Citizens Review and Advisory Board with members from various health professions — doctors, nurses, paramedics and EMTs — and community members.
- Create a policy, to be presented to the County Commission, “which will enhance communications regarding complaints that employees may be having in the workplace for help and resolution,” Stolz said.

“When the organization stabilizes, we will immediately begin a regional search for a new EMS director,” Stolz said. “We will involve the medical and public safety community as well as EMS employees in this process.”

Stolz apologized to the entire county for letting EMS reach a crisis point.

“To the citizens of this community, to EMS staff, and to this commission, I apologize for this concern in our public safety services. I feel it is my moral and ethical obligation to hear all sides in regards to the formal complaints made at the April meetings. I do not react to social media comments or newspaper allegations when it comes to these types of investigations, nor do I manage under mob rule. I will not react impulsively or emotionally to these types of matters.”

After the commission meeting, Stolz told The Eagle he hopes paramedics who have quit the department will consider returning now that Gallagher is out. The department has 21 unfilled paramedic positions.

“I can’t respect a profession any more than paramedics and police and fire,” Stolz said. “If you’re looking to really do something meaningful in your life — real, ground-level help — think about paramedicine. You are out truly helping the community, and I know we have a lot of people who have that frame of mind.”

EMS director John Gallagher ousted

EMS employees called for Gallagher’s removal at two closed-door town hall meetings in late April, spurring county leaders to order an external audit of EMS leadership and protocols by local law firm Hite, Fanning & Honeyman.

Calls for Gallagher’s resignation came in April following Eagle reporting on his handling of a 2019 case involving a 31-year-old patient who had apparently shot himself in the head. The patient was five minutes away from the nearest hospital, but Gallagher refused to transport him for five hours, even though the man continued breathing and had a pulse.

Wednesday’s decision was announced after Mary Arterburn, mother of retired Wichita Police Officer Brian Arterburn, addressed the Sedgwick County Commission, calling for swift action in response to the Eagle’s recent series of stories showing the department’s struggles under Gallagher.

“Please resolve this today because every second is vital in saving a life,” she said.

Arterburn credited Sedgwick County EMS with saving her son’s life in 2017 after he suffered extensive skull and brain damage when a drug dealer in an SUV ran over his head as he laid spike strips in the road. She said he has undergone several surgeries and years of physical therapy and is “able to live a life being content and happy as he can be. It’s not like it used to be, but he is content.”

She compared her son’s emergency medical treatment to Gallagher’s handling of the 2019 suicidal patient. Gallagher determined the patient was “unsalvageable” and

ordered paramedics not to take the man to an emergency room. The man died in hospice care 10 1/2 hours after the shooting.

“I’m so grateful that Mr. Gallagher was not in charge at the time of Brian’s incident,” Arterburn said. “I feel like had Mr. Gallagher been in charge of my son’s life . . . at that time, he would have said, ‘Well, he won’t have any chance of any kind of life being run over like that. Just wait and let him go.’”

The Kansas Board of EMS has proposed disciplinary action against the first responders who followed Gallagher’s orders on the suicide call. It also asked the Kansas Board of Healing Arts to launch an investigation into Gallagher’s actions as a physician.

Stolz placed Gallagher on paid administrative leave Monday.

Since Gallagher’s promotion two years ago, 92 employees have left the roughly 200-person department, causing ambulance shutdowns and dangerously slow response time.

The 92 employees don’t include Gallagher or Pereira, the deputy medical director who handed in her 90-day notice amid department turmoil earlier this month after 18 months on the job.

During the April town hall meetings, EMS employees also called on Stolz to remove Gallagher’s executive staff, which includes Pereira and Paul Misasi. Employees accused Pereira of discriminating against them based on sex and retaliation and creating a toxic work environment. They didn’t cite specific complaints against Misasi, deputy director of EMS, but they said he stood by as the department declined without speaking out.

On Monday, Stolz placed Misasi and Bill Robben, an EMS colonel, in charge of the department until an interim director is chosen.

Gallagher started as Sedgwick County’s medical director in 2015 after coming from the same position at a private ambulance service in Winona, Minnesota, a town of around 27,000 people. Stolz promoted him in 2019 as part of a move to consolidate the Office of the Medical Director and Emergency Medical Services, making Sedgwick County EMS one of five physician-led departments in the nation.

Gallagher signed a 5-year, \$1.1 million contract in December 2019. Removal without cause would require written notice 90 days in advance and about \$111,000, or six months salary. He also works in the emergency rooms at Ascension Via Christi and Wesley Medical Center.

Wesley Medical Center spokesperson Dave Stewart said Wednesday morning Gallagher was still a physician there.

Gallagher’s status could change based on the findings by the Kansas State Board of EMS or the Kansas Board of Healing Arts regarding his handling of the 2019 suicide call.

“There would definitely be probably a review process on our end, but that would be subsequent to the state board and other findings” such as the termination at Sedgwick County, Stewart said.

Ascension Via Christi, where Gallagher is also a physician, did not respond to multiple requests to comment.

No one immediately responded about his status from the Sedgwick County Medical Society, where Gallagher sits on a multiple committees, or the National Association of EMS Physicians, where Gallagher is a board member.

Howell responds to investigative report on Sedgwick County EMS

County commissioners support removal

Sedgwick County commissioners said they support Stolz’s decision and remain confident in his leadership.

But an ongoing feud between Commissioner Jim Howell and the other Republicans on the commission escalated Wednesday, with Commission Chairman Pete Meitzner attempting to limit his speech and Commissioner David Dennis implying Howell is only interested in EMS because his daughter-in-law works for the department.

“You can do your best to address a couple of things,” Meitzner told Howell. “But this is not going to be a back-and-forth deal today.”

“With all due respect, Mr. Chairman, you’re welcome to not stay if you don’t want to,” Howell said. “I’m going to stay here in front of the manager and media until I make my statement.”

Howell, who has led the charge to oust Gallagher and address problems within EMS while facing significant pushback from the county manager and the other Republicans on the commission, said he agrees with the changes Stolz has proposed for EMS.

“That is good. I want to give you appreciation for doing that,” Howell said.

“My greatest concern as we move forward, in what we look at in the future, is will another department be targeted next,” Dennis said. “Will it be fire, 911, Comcare, the sheriff, aging, etc., or will it just be those departments that a commission has a relative working in?”

Howell responded that he doesn’t get involved in county employees matters unless management fails to address it.

“I did receive a very worrisome letter from someone at 911, and I plan on discussing that with you. And if I have to get involved, I guess I don’t want to but something needs to be investigated there as well.”

Commissioners Lacey Cruse and Sarah Lopez said they appreciated Stolz taking ownership, but they want to focus on improving the EMS service.

“Now, we just have to take the right steps to move forward to get to where we want to be . . . I just hope that we can start building back trust with everyone,” Lopez said.

“The only thing that matters is what we do to rebuild,” Cruse said.



Travis Heying/The Wichita Eagle
County commissioners Lacey Cruse and Jim Howell, and county manager Tom Stolz, talk about what comes next now that Sedgwick County has ended its relationship with medical director John Gallagher.

EMS Director Dr. John Gallagher resigns; Sedgwick County to pay him \$85,000

By Chance Swaim | The Wichita Eagle | July 23, 2021

Sedgwick County EMS Director Dr. John Gallagher resigned on Friday, and the County Commission agreed to pay him \$85,177.85.

In exchange, Gallagher has agreed not to sue Sedgwick County, individual commissioners or any other county officials or employees. Gallagher also agreed not to apply for any position with the county in the future.

County Manager Tom Stolz placed Gallagher on paid administrative leave Monday and removed him from his position on Wednesday following a Wichita Eagle investigative series into response times and an EMS staff revolt.

The County Commission called a special meeting Friday to approve the severance package, which was signed by Gallagher on Thursday, a copy of the agreement shows.

Gallagher was also the county's medical director. The \$85,177.85 payment is the equivalent of 4 1/2 months salary. It will be paid out in a lump sum within seven days.

As part of the settlement, Sedgwick County also agreed to issue a joint announcement of Gallagher's resignation with the language agreed upon by both parties.

"Sedgwick County and Dr. John Gallagher have agreed that it is in the best interest of both parties to part ways," said Commission Chairman Pete Meitzner, reading from a prepared statement. "Therefore, Dr. John Gallagher has resigned as EMS Director effective July 23, 2021.

"Sedgwick County would like to extend Dr. John Gallagher well wishes for his future endeavors and appreciation for his service."

Since Gallagher's promotion two years ago, 92 employees have left the roughly 200-person EMS department, causing ambulance shutdowns and dangerously slow response times. This year, Sedgwick County EMS reached fewer than one in three patients within 9 minutes — a national standard for EMS response.

Gallagher started as Sedgwick County's medical director in 2015 after coming from the same position at a private ambulance service in Winona, Minnesota — a town of around 27,000 people.

Stolz promoted him in 2019 — against the wishes of a petition signed by more than 100 EMS employees — as part of a move to consolidate the Office of the Medical Director and Emergency Medical Services, making Sedgwick County EMS one of five physician-led departments in the nation.

Gallagher signed a 5-year, \$1.1 million contract in December 2019.

Calls for Gallagher's removal came in April following Eagle reporting on his handling of a 2019 case involving a 31-year-old patient who had apparently shot himself in the head. The patient was five minutes away from the nearest hospital, but Gallagher refused to transport him for five hours, even though the man continued breathing and had a pulse.

Commissioner Jim Howell organized two closed-door town hall meetings for EMS employees to air their frustrations to Stolz and Assistant County Manager Rusty Leeds on April 26 and April 28.

More than 120 past and present EMS employees attended, and 39 spoke directly to county management, describing a miserable, high-stress workplace with belittling bosses, discrimination and vague protocols that are driving away experienced paramedics. They also warned that slow response times and ambulance shutdowns under Gallagher put the entire county at risk of preventable death.

After the April meetings, Sedgwick County hired private law firm Hite, Fanning & Honeyman to investigate Gallagher's leadership and EMS protocols.

In a June 1 interview with The Eagle, Gallagher acknowledged his leadership style doesn't "jibe with everyone" but said he had no plans to resign. "I intend to be here for years," he said at the time. He also said he welcomed the law firm's audit.

County officials said they received a verbal summary of a portion of the investigation's findings on Wednesday but not a written copy.

Stolz said the audit likely won't be released to the public. The total cost of the audit has not yet been calculated, Stolz said.

"The cost of the audit will definitely be released because we're using taxpayer money for that," Stolz said.

"Regarding the components of the audit itself, there's attorney-client privilege attached to that, and I don't think we'll be able to release that actual report."

Stolz said he wasn't sure whether the attorney-client privilege could be waived by the county, allowing the audit to be publicly released. He referred all further questions about the audit to Sedgwick County Counselor Mike Pepoon.

"While I'm not required to answer your questions, I believe the client is Sedgwick County," Pepoon wrote in an email. "I'm not going to speculate at this time whether commissioners have the right to waive the privilege or in fact should do so in this instance. I can tell you in the 35 years I have been with the County I cannot think of a single instance of commissioners waiving such a privilege."

Commissioners look forward; EMS woes remain

Sedgwick County commissioners are eager to put the EMS controversy behind them, but the EMS crisis continues.

"We now want to move forward in a positive direction for our EMS department and put this behind us," Meitzner said.

Stolz said a staffing shortage persists and it could take years to build EMS back to its former staffing levels.

On Wednesday, Stolz announced sweeping changes to the department, rolling back the 2019 merger. The medical director and EMS operations will be separated, with a new director for each hired through a competitive search. The county would also create an EMS Citizens Advisory Board to improve transparency and add oversight of the department.

In June, no ambulances were available for the entire county for around 139 minutes, and the problems have continued in July. Throughout this week, multiple ambulances have had to be taken out of service due to the ongoing staffing shortage, with some calls being placed on hold until an ambulance becomes available.

“EMS is struggling as much as it ever has been,” Howell said. “The people that are providing care are excellent, . . . but the problems about having enough trucks — active ambulances — on the street, which results in status advisories, which actually ties into slower response times, which ties into exhausted staff.”

“We’re going in the wrong direction with our data, and things appear to be getting worse, and so we had to make a correction,” Howell said.

Howell said he thinks the problems with EMS can be fixed now that Gallagher is out of the picture. Some of the EMS paramedics who left the department under Gallagher may come back, Howell said.

“There’s going to be a desire for some people to come back,” Howell said. “Wishful thinking here, but I believe there’s going to be at least a few and maybe more. I think that one number I heard was maybe six, possibly even a dozen people who might come back potentially with the changes that have been made today.”

In the next few weeks, Sedgwick County will search for an interim replacement from within the EMS department. Paul Misasi, deputy director of EMS operations, and Bill Robben, an EMS colonel, are in charge of the department until an interim director is named.

“What’s next is we’re going to listen to EMS professionals,” Commissioner Lacey Cruse said. “We’re going to listen to paramedics, we’re going to listen to EMTs, we’re going to them to be part of the search process to find a new leader for this organization. It’s going to be a challenge because of the things that have happened over the past couple of months.”

With Gallagher’s resignation, Sedgwick County EMS is currently operating under the medical license of County Health Officer Dr. Garold Minns.

Deputy Medical Director Dr. Carolina Pereira, who turned in her 90-day notice earlier this month, declined to allow Sedgwick County EMS to operate under her medical license, Stolz said. The county could contract with a different physician to serve as interim medical director as early as next week.