

GUARDIAN ANGELS



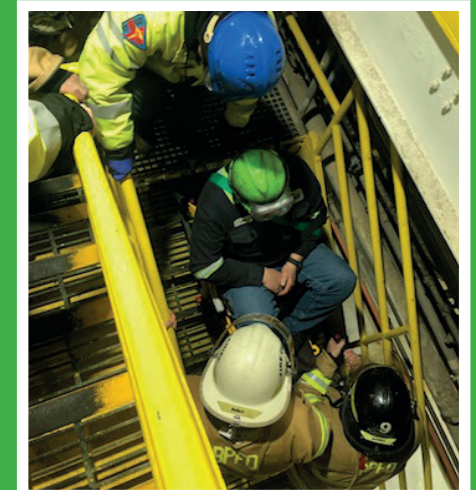
Honoring police officers, deputies, dispatchers, paramedics/EMTs and firefighters serving Steele County and the surrounding areas.

Steele County Times • May 2026

THANK YOU PUBLIC SAFETY HEROES!

We had participants from the Blooming Prairie Fire Department, and Ambulance. This year we also had Megan Ringhofer, Emergency Management Specialist & Deputy Director from Steele County, and some members from the Ellendale Fire Department. We are so grateful to the other agencies that joined us!

They had two emergency scenarios: one was an employee presenting chest pain and the other was a fire started by a chemical spill.



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BLOOMING PRAIRIE POLICE





Chief Greg Skillestad



Officer Dan Peach



Officer Aaron Friesen



Officer Brad Busho



Officer Joseph Martin



Officer Rick Ellingson



Officer Travis Belich

MISSION: The Blooming Prairie Police Department is dedicated to protection of the city, as well as loyalty to the community.

PERSONNEL: Police chief and several full and part-time officers: Chief Greg Skillestad, officers Dan Peach, Aaron Friesen, Brad Busho, Joseph Martin, Rick Ellingson and Travis Belich.

SQUAD FLEET: The department has three fully equipped

Ford Explorers. Each squad includes a traffic radar, audio/visual camera system, AED for cardiac arrest emergencies and a laptop computer connected to dispatch to better assist on traffic stops and emergency calls.

NUMBER OF CALLS: In 2025, the department handled 2,900 calls—about 300 more than 2024. Of note, the number of vehicle crashes, ordinance violations and criminal sexual

conduct calls saw a decrease, while calls involving mental health issues and child abuse/protection climbed slightly. Here are the major calls for service that officers handled in 2025:

Domestics/Assaults/Disturbances/Fights: 43
Welfare Checks: 34
Child Abuse/Protection: 7
Restraining Order Violations: 10
Mental Health: 18

Harassment: 10
Fraud: 14
Theft: 12
Burglary: 2
Juvenile Complaints: 14
Driving Complaints: 46
Motorist Assists: 11
Vehicle Crashes: 13
Animal Calls: 73
Suspicious Activity: 52
Ordinance Violations: 116
Assist other Agencies: 42
Alarms: 17

Civil: 26
Property Damage: 6
Criminal Sexual Conduct: 2

COVERAGE: In addition to patrolling the streets of Blooming Prairie, the department routinely assists Steele, Dodge, Mower and Freeborn counties. The department also covers for the Minnesota State Patrol. Blooming Prairie has police coverage 24 hours a day seven days a week.



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BLOOMING PRAIRIE AMBULANCE

SERVICE: There are two ambulance units that service Blooming Prairie and the surrounding area. BP Ambulance is a Basic Life Support service. When needed, Advanced Life Support is available through Mayo Ambulance in Austin and Owatonna.

TRAINING: The ambulance crew meets every third Monday of the

month for meeting and training.

AREA COVERED: The service covers the City of Blooming Prairie and surrounding rural townships. The coverage area is 144 square miles.

PERSONNEL: Karissa Fawver is the director of the ambulance service while Corey Johnson serves as vice president.

The service is down to 11 EMTs, which is five less than the previous year. Applications for new EMTs or first responders are welcome.

CALLS: The BP Ambulance crews responded to around 300 emergency medical calls in 2025.

SPECIAL NOTES: Like their peers to the west in Ellendale, the

Blooming Prairie Ambulance Service is seeking recruits.

The crew is down to 11 EMTs, with no emergency medical responders. There are six members who work in town, but only one can go on daytime calls – the ideal number is 15 to 20 active members.

Applications for new EMTs/first responders are

available at the Blooming Prairie City Center.

They also provided training and outreach to the Blooming Prairie community, including CPR training to Pine Springs Pool lifeguards as well as BPHS sophomores, now a requirement for graduation; blood pressure checks; ambulance support at the

Blooming Prairie Fourth of July celebration, BPHS football games, National Night Out and other local events; and has a ride-along program for EMT candidates.

In addition to those services, the crew members provide EMS education to third graders at Blooming Prairie Elementary School and local Scout groups.



Rick Hansen (30)



Jay Iverson (30)



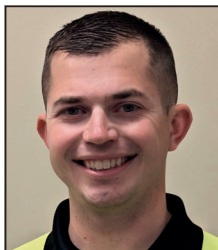
Jacob Peterson (24)



Jessica Kremer (20)



Paula Abbe (17)



Dan Peach (11)



Kathy Piller (17)

NOT PICTURED:

Corey Johnson (1)
Nicole Hetrick (1)
Jason Hubly (1)
Israel Wacek (new)

HOMETOWN HEROES

deserve our continued support and trust.

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We need to thank them for their service.*



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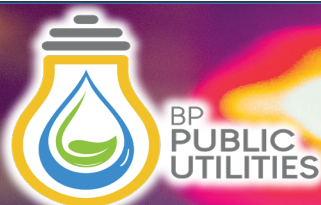
Senator Gene Dornink District 23

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911 ON THE MOVE

Rice Steele 911 Center to vacate Owatonna for new facility in Faribault



Brian Becker



"The upgraded center will include increased dispatch capacity, improved resiliency, and enhanced technology infrastructure."

Brian Becker
911 Center Administrator



Work has begun on the new Rice Steele 911 Center. The 26-year-old consolidated dispatch center will move from Owatonna to Faribault later this year and will feature all new equipment and technology.

BY RICK BUSSLER

Big changes are in the air for 911 service in Steele and Rice counties, but they involve something that won't impact those needing emergency help.

Later this year the Rice Steele 911 Center that has been operating in downtown Owatonna for decades will move to Faribault. Brian Becker, who has been administrator of the center since 2023, said the new facility will "support future growth" in both counties.

Construction is currently underway on a new, modern 911 facility designed to support current operations as well as future expansion. The center, which became consol-

idated for both counties in 2000, employs about 25 telecommunicators, formerly known as dispatchers, and other support staff.

For the past 26 years, the center has been operating on the second floor of the Law Enforcement Center in Owatonna. The Steele County Sheriff's Office had previously been in the LEC but moved more than a year ago. Once the 911 center leaves, Owatonna Police Department will be the only agency left in the LEC.

The center answers all 911 calls for both counties and dispatches police, fire and EMS in an area with combined population of about 102,000. The center handles about 110,000 emergency and non-emergency phone calls each year.

"The upgraded center will include increased dispatch capacity, improved resiliency, and enhanced technology infrastructure," said Becker. "The facility is being designed with the capability to expand services in the future, ensuring long-term scalability as needs evolve."

Becker expects the new center to be operational by fall.

In addition to a new facility, the 911 center has made other significant strides over the past year to enhance public safety services across both counties. One of the focuses has been strengthening the center's workforce, according to Becker.

The center, he said, has focused heavily on improving staffing, training and workplace culture. "New hiring standards, including comprehensive background and psychological evaluations, have been implemented to ensure the highest level of professionalism," Becker said. He noted training programs have expanded to include structured classroom orientation and certification requirements for supervisors and training officers.

"These efforts are designed to better prepare staff for the complex and

high-stress nature of emergency communications," he said.

Another major milestone has been the implementation of structured call-handling protocols through APCO International. Fire and law enforcement protocols are now in place, bringing greater consistency and efficiency to emergency response.

Besides police and fire, emergency medical dispatch protocols have also been implemented, allowing telecommunicators to provide critical, potentially life-saving instructions to callers before first responders arrive on the scene, Becker said.

The center also continues to invest in technology to better serve the public and support first responders. Enhancements include progress toward integrating RapidSOS, which provides real-time location and data from mobile devices, and the implementation of an AI-driven quality assurance system designed to review 100% of calls.

"These tools improve accuracy, reduce response times and ensure ongoing

See 911 CENTER on 16 ►



SUBMITTED PHOTOS



Sharon West was passionate about the Owatonna community and now her trust is donating \$25,000 to the Steele County Sheriff's Office for its new drone program.

BY RICK BUSSLER

Sharon West may have died two and a half years ago, but her legacy is still being felt in the community and will soon help local crimefighting efforts.

Prior to her death in 2023, West connected with some of her closest friends to outline her wishes of how she wanted to impact the community upon her death. West and her husband, Harvey West Jr., who died in 2008, did not have children.

"There were specific instructions on what she wanted to support," said Laura Resler, one of five trustees of the West family trust. "Law enforcement was something she felt very passionate about."

So, it shouldn't come as any surprise that the Harvey and Sharon West Trust has made a significant donation of \$25,000 to the Steele County Sheriff's

'THE GIFT OF GIVING'

Harvey and Sharon West Trust donate \$25K to Steele County Sheriff's Office for drones

Office for a pair of new drones, the first ever for the department. Sheriff Lon Thiele says it's the largest private donation his office has received in recent memory and possibly ever.

"It seemed like a no brainer to us," Resler said of the donation. "It makes a lot of sense for them to have that capability with the drones."

While police agencies have been utilizing drones for many years, this will be Steele County Sheriff's first attempt at implementing them. Thiele said sometimes it's better waiting until the technology has improved and the bugs get worked out.

Thiele pointed out how he knows one law enforcement agency in southern Minnesota that activated its drone and ended up losing it until it was found months later by a farmer in a field.

The sheriff said he had budgeted for one drone this year, but with the West donation, they will be able to purchase two drones without it impacting his budget at all. "I'm always looking to save the taxpayers money," he said.

The drones will arrive this week, ironically



The Steele County Sheriff's Office will be implementing drones within the next month. The office is receiving two drones from Plymouth-based Vertex through a \$25,000 donation from the Harvey and Sharon West Trust.

"Law enforcement was something she felt very passionate about."

Laura Resler

West Family Trustee

during National Police Week. Thiele said West's donation couldn't come at a better time, especially considering her generosity throughout the years in the Owatonna area. "Sharon was a big supporter of

law enforcement," he said. "It was an incredible and generous donation."

Sharon worked as the human resources manager for Truth Hardware for many years and retired in 2000. She began working

for the Owatonna Chamber of Commerce and Tourism in 2002, taking a year off between 2007 and 2008 to care for Harvey, and officially retired in 2012. She continued to serve as a Chamber Am-

bassador and as a volunteer until her passing.

She was a passionate and dedicated volunteer at the Steele County Historical Society and was a trustee of the Owatonna Foundation. She also served, or was a part of, many organizations, among them: the United Way of Steele County, the Civil Service Commission, the Airport Commission, the Hospice House, Nortonna Lodge, and the Dam Preservation Corpo-

See **DONATE \$25K** on 16 ►

BLOOMING PRAIRIE FIRE



SPECIAL NOTE: The fire department is continuing to work on replacing turnout gear. Chief Dean Naatz has been applying for grants to help cover costs. According to the National Fire Protection Association, the protective gear worn by firefighters must be retired no more than 10 years from the date of manufacture. While that's the maximum, it often requires replacement soon because of damage, hazardous contamination or compromised moisture barriers. A full set of firefighter turnout gear – coat and pants – runs about \$4,000. Accessories such



Members of the Blooming Prairie Fire Department include, back row, from left: John Lurken, Lee Holtberg, Justin Ferguson, Jacob Gross, Corey Johnson, Bryce Schlichter, Justin Krell, Lee Peterson, Matt Madsen and Ryan Hensel; front: Mike Hoffman, Riley Wagner, Jacob Naatz, Matt Kittelson, Dean Naatz, Dave Wradislavsky, Del Peterson, Mike Studer, Mike Trom, Mark Dekok and Jay Iverson. Not pictured: Rick Hansen, Mike Ingvalson, Jake Peterson, Jake Lembke, Dan Miner, Bruce Erath and Kristian Coughlin.

as new helmets, boots, gloves and hoods to fully equip one person can hit as much as \$6,000 per set. **TRAINING:** The second Monday of every month is a business meeting and the fourth is

a training session where fire department members learn skills such as: rope rescue, CPR, propane and LP burn rescue and confined space rescue. **CALLS:** There were 101 emergency calls in

2025, up slightly from the previous year. Of those calls: 44- rescues; 18 fires (structures, vehicles grass, brush and crops); 15 good intent calls); 11 hazardous conditions (includes gas spills, leaks,

CO calls and chemical related incidents); 8 false alarms and one weather-related call. **AREA COVERED:** Blooming Prairie Fire covers 187 sections, or 187 square miles. It provides

service into four counties: Steele, Dodge, Mower and Freeborn. Between the counties, nine townships are covered: Aurora, Blooming Prairie, Somerset, Summit, Ripley, Westfield, Udolpho, Moscow and Newry. **FIRE OFFICERS:** Chief Dean Naatz, 1st Assistant Justin Krell, 2nd Assistant Josh Toquam, Rescue Captain Matt Madsen, Assistant Rescue Captain Mark Dekok, Fire Marshall Ryan Hensel, Assistant Fire Marshall Lee Peterson; Training Officer Lee Holtberg and Assistant Training Officer John Lurkin. Matt Kittelson serves as secretary/treasurer.

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OWATONNA FIRE DEPARTMENT

STRUCTURE: Owatonna Fire is a combination of full-time firefighters, resident firefighters and paid on-call firefighters. The minimum staffing is one fire commander and one fire equipment operator.

COVERAGE: City of Owatonna, population 25,641; Steele County townships, 3,627; townships: Clinton Falls, Deerfield, Havana, Lemond, Meridan, Merton, Owatonna and Somerset.

MISSION: To save lives and property in a safe and efficient manner.

VISION: To be trusted and respected by all members of our community in saving lives and property.



STAFF PHOTO BY KAREN M. JORGENSEN

Members of the Owatonna Fire Department include front row, from left: Ben Staska, Bob Hager, Luke VanHooser, Tony Hartle, Dalton Meier, Kate Tepp, Leila Kath, Jeff Boland, Zac Karsten, Kevin Kreiner, Noah Tesch, Jeff Howard, Brooke Radel and Mitch Terpstra; back row: Tony Ringhofer, Jake Hines, Mike Urch, Jerry Hansen, Taylor Piotter, Tore Osland, Justin Brown, Nic Thamert, Tyler Brase, Willie Grubish, Anthony Kozelka, Arik Brase, Charlie Seykora, Matt Halverson, Ben Hanson. Not pictured are Brody Dalland and Dan Hed.

CALL VOLUME: In 2025, Owatonna Fire Department responded to 664 calls, up from 594 in 2024.

Of those, 101 calls were in rural areas, and six were mutual aid calls. Types of calls included fire alarm

(160), good intent calls (185), rescue calls (115), hazardous conditions (88), fire (65), and service calls

(38), with 13 calls listed as "other." In addition, the department invested 3,876 hours in firefighter

training, conducted 2,892 inspections, and provided public education to more than 2,000 people.

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OWATONNA POLICE



Chief
Jeffrey Mundale



Captain
Josh Sorensen



Captain
Tracy DuChene



Sgt.
Matt Oeltjenbruns



Sgt.
Valerie Satre



Sgt.
Ben Johnson



Sgt.
Joel Hunt



Officer
Steven Bowman

MISSION: “All members of the Owatonna Police Department are dedicated to providing a safe and secure community through partnerships, leadership and an unwavering commitment to excellence. Policing excellence through our people, our work and our relationships.”

AREA COVERED: Owatonna Police covers the 26,626 people of Owatonna. It is an area of about 14.62 square miles in Owatonna Township. The department handles around 40,000 calls per year.

2025 INCIDENTS: The police department handled 40,624 incidents in 2025, down by about 3,000 from the previous year. Here is a breakdown of specific types of calls:

- Traffic Stops: 4,513
- Medical Emergencies: 2,068
- Community Policing: 1,553
- Ordinance Violations: 1,523
- 911 Hangups: 1,423
- Animal Control: 1,067
- Suspicious Activity: 1,004
- Welfare Checks- 561
- Alarms: 448
- Disturbance/Disorderly: 409
- Thefts: 213
- Warrants: 119
- Fraud: 129
- Restraining Order Violations: 60
- Missing Persons: 95
- Child Abuse: 64
- Mental Health Crisis: 73
- Assaults: 96
- Death Investigations: 27

- DWI Arrests: 24
- Shoplifting: 25
- Fights: 23
- Weapon Violations: 14
- Criminal Sexual Conduct: 14
- Burglaries: 34
- Robberies: 2
- Stabbing: 1

ADMINISTRATION: Chief Jeff Mundale, Captains Josh Sorensen and Tracy DuChene

POLICE STAFF: Sergeants–Jason Petterson, Zackary Schumacher, Benjamin Johnson, Valerie Satre, Matthew Oeltjenbruns and Joel Hunt.

Detectives–Christian Berg, Steven Bowman, Brady Vaith, Derrik Quinlan and Matthew Tomsche.

Patrol Officers–Travis Ardolf, Alan Callahan, Julia Hansen, Darrin Helget, Jorge Jiminez, Travis Johnson, Connor MacDonald, Anthony Malepsy, Casey Martin, Kyle Martin, Benjamin Metcalf, Melissa Michael, Iris Reyes Mijares, Luke Selvik, Kristen Steinberg, John Van Alstine and Andrew Van Osdale.

COMMUNITY SERVICE OFFICERS: Dakoda DuChene, Gabriel Hein, Brian Shaw and Andrew Steele.

SUPPORT STAFF/RECORDS: Kimberly Dub, Pam Roberts, Wendy Gasner, Rebecca Melchert and Kirk Oswald.

CHAPLAINS: Brent Carlson and Loren Olson.



Officer
Anthony Malepsy



Officer
Casey Martin



Officer
Matthew Tomsche



Officer
Darrin Helget



Officer
Kyle Martin



Officer
Luke Selvig



Officer
John Van Alstine



Officer
Andrew Van Osdale



Officer
Travis Ardolf



Officer
Iris Reyes Mijares



Officer
Connor MacDonald



STEELE COUNTY SHERIFF

LOCATION: Since 2025, the sheriff's office has been located in the Steele County Detention Center at 2500 Alexander St. SW, Owatonna.

AREA: The sheriff's office serves a population of about 37,406 people and 432 square miles. There are six cities in the county, including Owatonna, Medford, Ellendale, Meriden, Hope and Blooming Prairie. The county is divided into 13 townships.

2025 INCIDENTS: The sheriff's office handled 21,141 incidents throughout 2025, up about 1,200 from the previous year. Of those, 4,818 were traffic stops, 28 child abuse/protection reports, 48 thefts, 101 DWI arrests, 12 burglaries and 9 assaults.

MISSION: The sheriff's office is dedicated to protect and serve the citizens of Steele County and support their quality of life. The office coordinates the efforts of emergency and support services to provide the highest level of responsiveness possible. Deputies also hold themselves accountable for their actions and take

pride in a professional level of service and fairness to all.

SHERIFF: Lon Thiele is in his fourth term as Steele County's chief law enforcement officer. His office is responsible for protecting citizens throughout the county, including the communities of Medford and Ellendale, which contract through his office for police protection. In addition to protecting and serving citizens, he supervises sheriff's office personnel, detention center, special deputies, mounted posse, water patrol and courthouse security.

Thiele was first elected to the sheriff's position in November 2010 and re-elected in 2014, 2018 and 2022. His current term expires in 2026, and he plans to run again in this fall's election.

ADMINISTRATION: Sheriff Lon Thiele, chief deputy Scott Hanson and administrative assistant Karen Meier and support staff Kindra Gasner (supervisor), Jessica Bedney, Natatia Koktavy, Stephanie Reinardy and Christina Steneman.

SERGEANTS: Andy Seifert, Mike Smith, Tyler Brase and Jacob Holm.

SHERIFF'S DEPUTIES: Matt Borash (investigator), Taylor Cureton, Ben Frear, Jeffrey Gunther, Josh Horejsi, Tyler Lair, Adam Rector, Sean Robbins, Chad Schlueter, Karson Vigeland, Jeremy Wiste and Kari Woltman (investigator).

COURT BAILIFFS: Jake Miller and Jayson Teichroew.

JURY ATTENDANTS: Julie Harriman, Pamela Kirchner and Kay Oberle.

DETENTION CENTER: Anthony Buttera, administrator; Paul Prissel, assistant administrator; Greg Huebbe, training and programs; Jed Loftus, Joyce Prusha, Michelle Bromley and Jesse Steneman, sergeants; Michael Witter, Anthony Solseth, Linda Skala and John Anderson, corporals; Matthew Gwin, Travis Avelar, Steve Schulz, Sean Grivette, Brian Rinehart, Katelin Bahl, Jessica Guggisberg, Rachel Kuriger, Katya Krueger, Brianna Reese, Kimberly Saenz Juarez,



Sheriff Lon Thiele



Chief Deputy
Scott Hanson



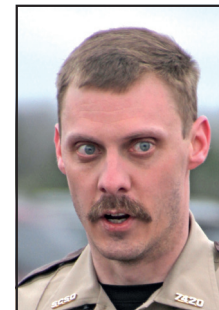
Sgt. Mike Smith



Sgt. Andy Seifert



Sgt. Tyler Brase



Sgt. Jake Holm



Deputy Sean
Robbins



Investigator
Matt Borash



Investigator
Kari Woltman



Miles Wood



Gene Fisher



Paul Hanson



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STEELE COUNTY SHERIFF



Barb Stendel



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Coordinator
Wyonne Priebe



Jeff Kirchner



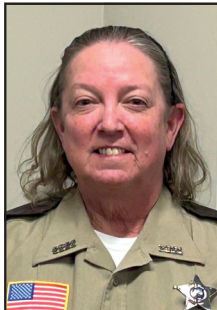
Gene Linse



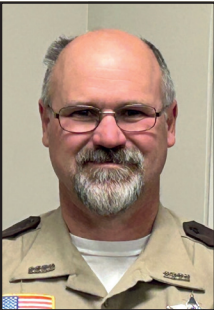
Dennis Himle



Mike Meyer



Mary Delzer



Jeff Stendel



Grant Duffy



Michelle Thompson



Matt Mensing

Gina Felstead, Diego Salazar, Cristian Overland, Quentin Kroll, Cournee Kopachek, Destany Adreon, Bryce Reuter, Destiny Arango, Narda Zetino and Scott Lurken, correctional officers; De Vonwald, Michael Meyer, Grant Duffy, Jeffrey Ratzloff, George Devinny, Joel Jandt and Matt Summer, transport officers.

SPECIAL DEPUTIES:
Coordinator Wyonne Priebe, Sgt. Lewis Luedtke, Mary Delzer, Grant Duffy, Gene Fisher, Paul Hanson, Dennie Himle, Jeff Kirchner, Gene Linse, Mike Meyer, Barbara Stendel, Jeff Stendel, Steve Wrede, Miles Wood and Matt Mensing.

MOUNTED POSSE:
Capt. Tony Schwering, 1st Lt. Mary Purfeerst, 2nd Lt.

Anna Schultz, Warrant Officer Becky Schwering, Sgt. of Arms Tom Hager, Joe Schwering, past captain, Michelle Darrah, Brittanica Eklund, Melissa Foster, John Gerold, Josh Horejsi, Susan Jackson, Megan Jensen, Dolly Jones, Kay Klemmer, Bob Malecha, Jill Malecha, Duane Peltz, Jordan Skelton and Tanner Wesely.

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RICE STEELE 911 CENTER

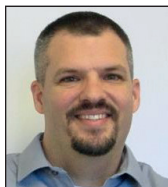
The Rice Steele 911 Center is in its 26th year of existence and is based in Owatonna until later this year when it will move to Faribault. Brian Becker has been the administrator of the center since February 2023. The agency provides public safety

communications, mobile data computer service and records management support for all law enforcement, fire departments and emergency medical services in both counties.

MISSION: We are dedicated to providing quality communications for the

Public and Public Safety Agencies. The Center will serve as the vital link between the public and Public Safety organizations through responsiveness and technical excellence while in partnership with our users and employees.

See 911 CENTER on 16 ►



Brian Becker



Alexia Gentz



Amber Bolte



Atlanta Shilts



Brielle Bauer



Brooke Kline



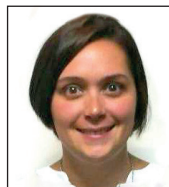
Christina Conati



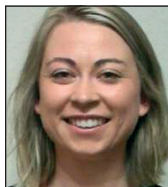
Derrek Matson



Gabby Lewis



Jennifer Colby



Jennifer Garza



Katie Twaddle



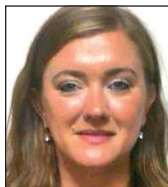
Kelsie Trnka



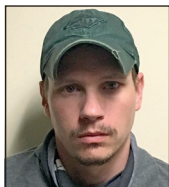
Kelsy Fails



Lisa DeRaad



Marah Ryks



Matt Collins



Megan Franklin



Nicole Pratt



Nikki Hable



Norma Hoffmaster



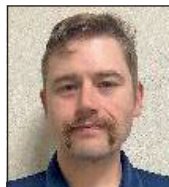
Stacey LaPlount



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ELLENDALE FIRE DEPARTMENT



SPECIAL NOTE: Work finally began on Ellendale’s new fire hall in 2025; the department has since nearly completed its move-in. It is steel, has a life span of 80 years and cost just a hair over \$900,000. The four-bay, 5,300-square-foot building has a meeting room, office and two bathrooms on the main floor. Plug-ins drop from the two-story ceiling for the trucks, “and as soon as we start the truck, they pop out and retract,” said Josh Otto, who has been with the EFD for 11 years. A set of stairs lead up to an open loft space that houses the HVAC system – with plenty of room for storage and potential additional meeting space. A talented fire crew meant all the internet cable work was done in-house; a company donated a significant amount of office supplies, adding up to savings of more than \$15,000. A public open house for the new facility is planned for this summer.

CALLS: Ellendale Fire responded to 201

emergency calls in 2025, up significantly from 169 the previous year. The department assists Ellendale Ambulance with medical emergencies. The department also responds to grass fires, car crashes and structure fires. Last year’s calls included: 144 medicals, 24 motor vehicle crashes, 7 mutual aid calls, 2 storm spotting. There were 20 cancellations.

TRAINING: Meeting the first Monday of every month for training sessions, the department stays up to date and ready to help.

COVERAGE: The department covers the city of Ellendale, 2 miles south, 6 miles west and 4 miles east. To the north, Ellendale covers 1 mile north of Hope.

PERSONNEL: Officers: Chief Logan Busho, Assistant Chief Patrick Kruger, Captains Nolan McGowan, Frank Altrichter, Derek Strohschein; Lieutenants: Tyler McGowan, Travis Ladwin, Allison Muillenberg.



The volunteers for the Ellendale Fire Department include: back row, from left, are Tyler McGowan, Chief Logan Busho, Pat Kruger, Nolan McGowan and Brian Flatland (no longer with department); front: Frank Altrichter, Josh Burgess, Derek Strohschein, Charles Spinler, Travis Ladwig and David Modder. Not pictured are Allison Muillenberg, Bud Olson, Rick Johnson, Colton Kruger, Jake Kaplan, Josh Otto, Kyle Powers, Dylan Arnold, Trenton Hilley and Jennelle Olson.

Firefighters: Bud Olson, Rick Johnson, Charlie Spinler, Colton Kruger, David Modder, Jake Kaplan, Josh Burgess, Josh Otto, Kyle Powers, Dylan Arnold, Trenton Hilley and Jenelle Olson.



Fire Chief Logan Busho shows off the nearly completed fire hall, which will be fully functional and operational soon. The city plans to have an open house later this summer.

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ELLENDALE-GENEVA AMBULANCE

'It's definitely what I want to do'

Local ambulance volunteers find the reward

BY KAY FATE
STAFF WRITER

If you want to be a hero, become a first responder: EMT, firefighter, law enforcement.

If you want to be revered, figure out a way to get everyone else to become one, too.

The Ellendale Ambulance Service has eight licensed EMTs, and another taking the class to become certified.

That number, said Bethany Boswell, "is pretty low; it's been declining. When I first started in 2014, we were at roughly 16 EMTs."

See **VOLUNTEERS** on 15 ►



STAFF PHOTO BY KAY FATE

Members of the Ellendale Ambulance Service include residents of both Ellendale and Geneva, one of its primary service areas, where a second ambulance is kept. From left are Curt Boswell, Bethany Boswell, Alexis Bartness, Garry Gordinier, Chelsey Johnson, James Neidermeier and Mike Johnson. Johnson, who spent 30 years working as a police officer in the Twin Cities, is now on the Geneva Fire Department and serves as an EMT on the ambulance. Curt Boswell and Gordinier are also on the GFD.



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GENEVA FIRE DEPARTMENT



STAFF PHOTO BY KAY FATE

Responders for the Geneva Fire Department include, front, from left, Wyatt Grose, Justin Stieglbauer, Curt Boswell, Garry Gordinier, Bear Bailey, Lonnie Bartsch, Travis Broskoff, Mike Johnson, Shannon Wobschall, Dan Reed (Hollandale FD), Josh Cornelius (Hollandale FD), Josh Scheffler (Hollandale FD) and Seth Hartman (Hollandale and Geneva FD). Standing on the truck are Alex Beenken, left and Tyler Peterson.

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Local ambulance volunteers find the reward

◀ **VOLUNTEERS** from 14
That means the on-call work has essentially doubled; the pay remains ... non-existent.

The dip in volunteers is no surprise, said Greg Bartsch.

“You have to go to school for four months, you have to be on call and you get nothing for it – come on in,” he joked.

Bartsch is a member of the Geneva Fire Department who used to go on medical calls; he now sits on the Joint Powers Board of the service, which includes Geneva as part of its primary service area.

Constant shortage

It’s a problem that is not just in Ellendale, Steele County, or Minnesota: The U.S. is facing a severe, long-term shortage of EMTs and paramedics, driven by low wages, high burnout and high turnover rates.

The crisis, which affects rural areas particularly hard, can mean longer 911 response times and a strain on all emergency services.

True, true and true, Boswell said.

“It’s not an easy profession; there’s a high rate of burnout,” she said, and starting pay is \$22 an hour on larger, paid-staff ambulance services – “and that’s if you’re lucky.”

It can also be difficult, scary, unpredictable ... “and time-consuming,” Boswell said. “Lots of things.”

She’s part of one of a few ambulance services in the area to pivot to a different model, with the hope that

calls won’t be missed and recruiting will be done in earnest.

“The Ellendale Ambulance Service has one full time, daytime person, which is a paid position,” she said.

“That’s me.”

Boswell is required to be available from 6 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. She works at the NRHEG Elementary School in town, which allows her to leave for ambulance calls.

She is paid a flat rate to be available, “but as soon as the page goes off, I become a volunteer.”

Varied funding

The position is funded by the townships surrounding them through a formula that was established more than 30 years ago, based on population.

Steele County also contributes \$5,000 every year; the rest comes from the revenue from the calls. They, like many ambulance companies, struggle for reimbursement promised from Medicare.

The money they do collect “is essentially to pay insurance, work comp and Beth’s salary,” said Garry Gordinier, director of the ambulance service. “So far, it’s been working just fine.”

Still a first responder with the Geneva Fire Department, “I put over 40 years in, so it’s time to retire,” Gordinier said of his time as an EMT.

Constant training

On a recent Monday evening, volunteer firefighters were also at the meeting for

the group’s monthly consortium training through Southeast Minnesota EMS, based out of Rochester.

“They do our training meetings,” Boswell said, “then on the off-meetings, we do our own hands-on.”

“There are a lot of things to keep up with,” said Gordinier. “We’re very fortunate that we have the consortium people that come about six times year, bring us up to date, cover all the things that are required by the national register.”

They’ve responded to as many as 315 calls in a year; 2025 saw about 255 calls, including calls for mutual aid with other services, most of them Mayo Ambulance.

It’s a lot, said Chelsey Johnson, who became certified just a couple of months ago.

“I’ve wanted to do it for a long time,” she said, “and my kids are grown now a little bit, where I’m able just to leave them at home” to respond to a medical call.

Still, Johnson said, the training was “probably the hardest thing that I’ve done. It took me a little longer to pass the test – it is hard.”

In Minnesota, in order to become a licensed EMT, you also have to be nationally registered.

“That’s how they give you a Minnesota license,” Boswell explained. “I mean, it’s equivalent to some of the nursing” requirements.

The ‘why’

Johnson’s father is a longtime Ellendale firefighter.

“I think even when I was a little kid, I kind of knew,” she said. “I would rather hang out with the elderly than with kids my age.”

She became a certified nursing assistant at 15; she now works at the elementary school in town, “so I’m able to leave most times” an ambulance call comes in.

“It’s been a roller coaster, and I’m not kidding,” Johnson said.

“In EMS, types of calls kind of go in a cycle,” Boswell said. “Sometimes you get the mundane, simple, every-day; sometimes you get the high-intensity, low-frequency calls – but that frequency kind of goes up.”

That’s what the start of Johnson’s EMS career has been, she said. “I questioned it for a second, but it’s definitely what I want to do.”

The day Johnson started her classes, James Neidermeier became an EMT.

“I always wanted to do it,” he said. “My wife convinced me, finally, to just do it last year. I’ve loved it. I want to help people.”

He started classes a month after their first

child was born; a second child was born this month.

It’s been about what he expected, but “there’s a lot to it, that’s for sure. You never stop learning,” Neidermeier said.

Alexis Bartness, of Ellendale, works as a hospital tech, but had a more personal reason to become an EMT.

“Well, my sister got really sick, and the EMTs that transported her, kind of on her last leg up to Rochester, were some of the best people I’ve ever met in my entire life,” Bartness said.

“It just kind of inspired me; I’d always liked medicine, but it inspired me to do emergency medicine.”

The future

“The last (EMT certification) class we had, we had nine people that expressed interest,” Gordinier said. Just four completed it.

The Ellendale Ambulance Service will cover the cost of training if the volunteer is “willing to give us a minimum of two years on our service,” Boswell said.

They are always recruiting.

Like other smaller ambulance services, the Ellendale service is trying to get into the high school.

“We’re trying to get – or pique – the interest of those kiddos that are 17, 18, getting ready to go” to college, Boswell said. “One of our EMTs actually did his coursework post-secondary.”

It’s nice to get them early, she acknowledged, but “then it’s harder for them to commit to two years, because they don’t necessarily know what college is going to be like, and what they’re going to do, but if we can at least get them interested, sometimes they’ll come back around.”

Like Neidermeier, who started the process in high school.

“I didn’t take it seriously,” he admitted, “then I came back around to it and ended up here.”

Johnson calls it “a whole new family.

“It’s really, really, really cool, when you have the opportunity, to stand back and actually watch,” Johnson agreed. “When you’re actually in the moment doing it, you can’t really, but when you see it, it’s a cool thing, how everyone has their own thing they’re doing, and it just...”

She shrugged, smiling. “It’s just really nice.”

MISSION: To provide a vital public safety service.

SPECIAL NOTE: Members of the Ellendale Fire Department also respond to calls for the ambulance service. More than a dozen people recently signed up to take first responder classes to volunteer on the EG Ambulance, adding a much-needed boost to crew numbers. The course began earlier this month.

SERVICE AREA: The department covers five townships: Berlin, Summit, Geneva, Bath and Lemond as well as the cities of Ellendale and Geneva in Steele and Freeborn counties.

CREW: Formed and operated by a Joint Powers Board, Greg Bartsch is the director of the Ellendale-Geneva Ambulance service. There are two ambulance rigs with one based out of Ellendale and the other in Geneva. Ellendale Ambulance has been serving the area for 69 years.

Harvey and Sharon West Trust donate \$25K to Steele County Sheriff's Office for drones

◀ **DONATE \$25K** from 6 ration. She was co-chair for the Owatonna Sesquicentennial Committee and was instrumental in helping rebuild the Central Park Bandshell in Central Park and cataloging Owatonna's history in the Sesquicentennial History Book.

She was the first female chair for the Owatonna Chamber and the first female Rotary president in Owatonna. West was recognized with the Woman of the Year award and later the Pioneer Woman Award from the Owatonna Business and Professional Women's organization.

The Owatonna Foundation recognized the philanthropic commitment of Harvey and Sharon, both financially and in spirit, with the 2022 Spirit of the Community Award, noting they had "unwavering enthusiasm and passion for making a difference" in Owatonna.

Resler couldn't agree more about Sharon West's legacy.

"She was very much a community icon, very involved and quietly philanthropic throughout the community," Resler said of Sharon. "She is a great example for all of us."

While working as director of the Steele County Historical Society years ago, Resler first became acquainted with West. After that, West became a "very dear friend" to both Resler and her husband.

Resler referred to the sheriff's donation as "the gift of giving." She is confident West approves of the drones. "We know what Sharon would have liked and if it benefits the community and hits on what she was passionate about, we're very willing to support those types of projects," she said, adding with a chuckle, "She hasn't struck us down with lightning so she

must approve."

The only regret will be that West won't be able to see the drones fly.

Resler said the drones are especially important in crimefighting efforts "for the safety of officers and civilians."

Sheriff Thiele said, "I will be able to put their legacy into existence with the drones. They will assist with the safety of deputies in so many ways."

The sheriff's office currently has two deputies trained to fly the drones, and Thiele hopes to expand that to five in the near future. In addition to using the drones for search and rescue missions locally, they will also be utilized in a supportive role for other police agencies throughout the area that need assistance.

For West's board of trustees, making the donation is gratifying. "It's very heartwarming for us to honor her vision and

see positive things in the community," Resler said. "It's a big responsibility, and we all take it very seriously."

She added, "We love Sharon and what a great way to give back to her and the community."

The trustees meet quarterly to decide on who will be recipients of donations from the Wests, according to Resler. She said over the past two years they have been fairly conservative with donations but now they are getting more aggressive. They are operating on a five-year buy down of the trust. She noted the sheriff's donation is actually not the largest donation they have made.

"There are more donations coming this spring," Resler said, noting there will be several significant ones. "It has been our privilege to do this for the community. It's one of the highlights for me."

Rice Steele 911 Center to vacate Owatonna for new facility in Faribault

◀ **911 CENTER** from 5 training and accountability," Becker said.

He said none of this would be possible without the commitment to excellence on behalf of the center's employees. "These advancements are a direct result of the dedication and professionalism of our team. Every improvement we make is focused on better supporting our staff, our responders, and most importantly, the communities we serve," he said, adding "our goal is to ensure that when someone calls 911, they receive the highest level of service possible."

Becker is incredibly proud of the staff and the work they do every day. "This profession requires a level of resilience, dedication and compassion that is not for everyone," he says.

He pointed how that telecommunicators face

difficult and often stressful situations while remaining calm, focused and professional.

"The sacrifices they make—both seen and unseen—do not go unnoticed," Becker said. "This special group of individuals truly makes a difference in the lives of those we serve, and they are the foundation of everything we accomplish as an organization."

Becker reminds the public that the center remains committed to continuous improvement, transparency and innovation as it works to provide dependable emergency communications now and into the future.

"These advancements reflect a continued commitment to providing reliable, efficient and high-quality emergency communications for more than 100,000 residents we serve."

Rice Steele 911 Center

◀ **911 CENTER** from 12 **ADMINISTRATION:** Administrator Brian Becker, office manager Nikki Hable and shift supervisors Matt Collins, Derrek Matson and Mike Urch. Jennifer Colby is the public safety manager.

TELECOMMUNICATORS: Brielle Bauer, Amber Bolte, Christina Conati, Lisa DeRaad, Megan Franklin, Jennifer Garza, Alexia Gentz, Brooke Kline, Stacey LaPlount, Gabby Lewis, Nicole Pratt, Atlanta Shilts, Tim Siebsen, Kelsie

Trnka, Katie Twaddle, Kelsy Fails, Norma Hoffmaster, Marah Ryks and John Wunderlich.

AREA: Rice and Steele counties have a combined population of about 101,500. The center provides dispatching services for the following:

• **Law enforcement-** Rice County Sheriff, Steele County Sheriff and police

departments: Blooming Prairie, Owatonna, Faribault, Northfield, Lonsdale and Dundas.

• **Fire-** Blooming Prairie, Faribault, Lonsdale, Northfield, Nerstrand, Ellendale, Morristown, Medford and Owatonna.

• **EMS-** Blooming Prairie Ambulance, Ellendale Ambulance, Mayo Ambulance, North Ambulance

and Northfield Ambulance.

CALL VOLUME: In 2025, the 911 Center had a total of 110,593 emergency and non-emergency phone calls, a slight increase over the previous year and significantly higher than 2023 when there were 87,000 calls. The center's busiest day of the week is Wednesday. The busiest hours in

the center are 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. The busiest month of the year is August.

The Owatonna Police Department produces the most calls for the center. The busiest fire agency was Faribault Fire. Mayo Ambulance (based in Owatonna) had the most EMS calls followed by North Ambulance (based in Faribault).



STAFF PHOTO BY KAREN M. JORGENSEN

Members of the Medford Fire Department include front row, from left: Mathias Heinrichs, Matt Mullenbach, Craig Helgeson. Middle Row: Bo Noble, Ben Finholdt, Alex Schwartz, Chris Ditlevson, Dakota Ellingson, Greg Sanborn, Mark Ristan, Ben Maas and Brad Hager; back row: Trevor Davis, Mike Prondzinski, Nick Goodnature, Kelly Markham, Eric Finholdt, John Anhorn, Tim Amberg, Mike Smith, JJ Lawson and Dan Simon.

MEDFORD FIRE
DEPARTMENT

OFFICERS: Chief Craig Helgeson, Assistant Chief Eric Finholdt and commanders Matt Mullenbach and Mike Smith. Rick Hager is the emergency management coordinator. Medford currently has 22 volunteer firefighters.

HISTORY: The volunteer department began in

1939. Medford's first fire truck was equipped with a 300-gallon tank, roof ladder and extension ladder, two hand hooks and a pump with a capacity of 200-gallons-per-minute. The first fire hall was built in 1954.

FLEET: The department consists of three

pumpers, two tankers and a personnel carrier.

COVERAGE AREA: The department provides fire service for 1,300 people in Medford as well as Medford Township and 18 sections of Deerfield Township. The department responded to 160 calls in 2025.

SPECIAL THANKS TO AREA RESPONDERS



Medford Schools would like to thank the Steele County Sheriff's Office, Medford Fire, State Patrol and Mayo Ambulance for prioritizing safety with our students through this spring's Mock Car Crash.

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MAYO AMBULANCE- OWATONNA

LOCATION: Mayo Clinic Ambulance Service serves Owatonna, Albert Lea, Austin, Duluth, Fairmont, Litchfield, Little Falls, Mankato, Plainview, Rochester and St. Cloud. In Owatonna, the service is based at 1005 S. Cedar Ave.

COVERAGE: Mayo Clinic Ambulance provides ground and air medical transport services throughout Minnesota and Wisconsin. The ground ambulances provide advanced life support with paramedics and emergency medical technicians. There are more than 70 ambulances plus medical helicopters in the Mayo network.

CALL VOLUME: Mayo ambulances respond to more than 70,000 emergency calls for service each year. The local service responds to approximately 5,300 calls each year throughout Steele County except for Ellendale and Blooming Prairie, unless needed for mutual aid.

HISTORY: On April 1, 2019, Mayo Clinic took over Gold Cross Ambulance, which had been part of Mayo Clinic since 1994.

CREW: With a roster of 31, the ambulance service has three daytime crews and two nighttime crews, with two people on each crew. There are four rigs based in Owatonna.

PERSONNEL: Supervisor/Paramedic: Shawn Smith; Assistant Supervisor/Paramedic: Debra Beckstrom; Paramedics/EMTs: Logan Baedke, Edward Juarez, Nora Jorgensen, Chloe



Some of the paramedics with Mayo Ambulance based in Owatonna include, from left: Shawn Smith, Logan Baedke, Edward Juarez, Nora Jorgensen, Chloe Fetter, Allie Kuehl and Emilia Flemmings.

Fetter, Allie Kuehl, Emilia Flemmings, Derek Baker, Alexis Bartness, Deb Beckstrom, Travis Blake, Richard Ellingson, Cassie Fedder, Benjamin Finholdt, Brady Hartman, Lori Heslep, Evelyn Hjelmgren, Jeffrey Howard, Michael Lau, Lauren McMichael, Raisa Pate, Isaac Potter, Michele Pulliam, Damion Ramon, Josh Ranfranz, Rachel Schmist, Evan Schulz, Kalli Swanson, Merisa Thompson and Dawn Winkels.

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