



Touch a Truck! The Coke County Library in Robert Lee hosted a Touch a Truck event on Wednesday, July 12. Attendees were able to view various emergency vehicles, trucks, and other equipment.

were estimated to be volunteers — nearly a quarter less than in 1984.

The problem is bound to get worse as the current batch of volunteers is getting older and close to retiring, and there are fewer people living there to refill the ranks, Brooks and other local officials fear.

“Our situation here mirrors pretty well what’s going on in rural Texas as far as EMS and fire departments are concerned, and that’s the lack of volunteers,” said Lamb County Judge James DeLoach. “We don’t have as many people here as we used to in rural areas, and not as many people willing to volunteer.”

New census data shows several of the rural counties surrounding Lamb County — which includes Olton and is about 55 miles northwest of Lubbock — have had population decline over the last year. Lamb itself has lost 2.4% since 2020.

More volunteers are also needed in the Panhandle, where wildfires can burn for days and stretch for miles. So far this year, there have been at least 23 wildfires recorded in the Panhandle by Texas A&M Forest Service.

“The emergencies don’t always happen where there’s a population center,” said Steven Denny, public information officer for Potter County Fire Rescue. “So it’s important to have these volunteer departments, especially in West Texas rural areas.”

The station is close to Perryton, where another tornado hit last month, but they didn’t respond to the disaster because, like Matador, the town was full. Potter County Fire Rescue relieved the usual crews there and responded to emergencies unrelated to the tornado, something Denny said stations in the region do to help after deaths in the department.

“It’s pretty critical that we have volunteer responders, but it can be a rewarding activity to do,” Denny said. “You get to help somebody on their absolute worst day.”

For the people who live and travel through the vast Texas plains, where medical care is already limited, the lack of volunteers could eventually make it harder to get any kind of aid in a life-or-death

situation.

“Once in a while when we get caught short, it’s because we’ve got one truck out on a call and have another coming in,” said Brooks, who is also director of the EMS in nearby Earth. “Most of the time we can cover that, but sometimes we’re short. It depends on how many people we’ve got in town at that particular time.”

According to DeLoach, there are 12 EMS trucks to serve the population of nearly 13,200 in Lamb County, and some of the crews worry about what could happen if multiple calls come in, and there aren’t enough people to respond.

The crew at Olton VAA is mostly full, with 12 certified personnel and six drivers that cover two trucks. The trucks are typically staffed with a driver and two EMTs — more certified people on board means better care for the person injured or dying during the nearly hourlong trek to the nearest major hospital.

But, Brooks said, finding certified personnel — let alone on a volunteer basis — has been tough to come by. This is why training new health care workers has become a priority of his, even if the students will possibly leave Olton and practice elsewhere as soon as the course is done. The current class has a dozen people in it, but only three are likely to practice in the small town of 1,860 people.

While that can be a bittersweet part of the training process, it is inevitable in rural communities. DeLoach has been a licensed paramedic since 1990 and says he has seen less and less people willing or able to volunteer over several decades now.

“When I started, it wasn’t hard to get a class anytime we wanted and we used to never start an EMT class without 10 people,” DeLoach recalled. “Now, we’re lucky if we get a class every year and then, we might get two people out of that class.”

This has happened for a number of reasons, such as the rising cost of living limiting people’s ability to work for free, ongoing workforce shortages or how few certification courses are offered in rural areas.

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Our County, Our State and Our Country**



And Don’t Forget to Pray for Rain!