

Rural First Responder Health Initiative

THE OPPORTUNITY

Michigan's rural first responders face significant occupational health risks while often having limited access to convenient healthcare. Across Michigan's 53 rural counties, there are approximately 14,440 firefighters, EMS professionals and law enforcement officers — with a substantial musculoskeletal injury burden, particularly among EMS professionals and paramedics.

MAC is working with AlignWell and other potential partners on an innovative approach: bring preventive healthcare directly to the first responders who need it.

THE IDEA: TAKE THE CARE TO THEM

Rather than asking rural first responders to leave their communities or miss a shift to access care, a mobile clinical unit would travel directly to regional first responder locations. The proposed model combines:

- Musculoskeletal evaluation and risk assessment
- Biometric and metabolic screening
- Identification of health and injury risks
- Referral and routing to appropriate follow-up care
- Education and ongoing re-screening

The goal: identify problems earlier and connect first responders with appropriate care before those problems become more significant.

CHIROPRACTIC AS PART OF THE HEALTHCARE TEAM

An important part of this initiative is its multidisciplinary model. The proposed clinical team includes:

Doctor of Chiropractic — musculoskeletal examination, clinically indicated imaging, and assessment of the physical demands associated with first responder work.

Registered Nurse — vitals, biometric screening and laboratory collection.

Nurse Practitioner — review of laboratory findings and medical oversight of those results.

Physician-Led Virtual Primary Care — follow-up for medical findings identified through screening.

This is an important shift in how chiropractic can be positioned within the broader healthcare system: not working alongside healthcare — working within it.

LEARNING FROM AN EARLIER ADVOCACY EFFORT

MAC had previously approached the state about providing physical examinations in rural communities. The concern raised was that a single-discipline model did not provide the comprehensive clinical approach the state was seeking. Instead of abandoning the idea, the concept evolved.

The response wasn't to argue that chiropractic should do everything. It was to build the right healthcare team.

The new model combines chiropractic's expertise in musculoskeletal health with medical screening and follow-up — directly addressing the concern raised previously.

AND IT'S ALREADY BEING TESTED

This isn't only a concept on paper. AlignWell is currently operating a first responder program with Tri-Hospital EMS in Port Huron through an existing partnership. At the time this proposal was prepared, approximately 40 first responders had been screened:

18%

identified as being at high risk for a major musculoskeletal injury before the injury occurred

93%

of first responders receiving an on-site evaluation subsequently receive care

This demonstrates the potential value of putting clinicians directly in front of a population that may otherwise delay or forgo care.

MAC'S ROLE

MAC brings something important to this collaboration: Michigan's chiropractic profession. Under the proposal, MAC would help:

- Connect the initiative with chiropractors throughout Michigan
- Engage and organize participating providers
- Build relationships with state agencies and other healthcare organizations
- Help connect identified first responders with appropriate community-based care
- Represent chiropractic as part of a larger multidisciplinary solution

The broader partnership would combine MAC's statewide provider network with AlignWell's mobile clinical capabilities and relationships with Michigan's EMS community and other first responder organizations.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

This initiative is about more than one rural health project. It demonstrates what can happen when the profession moves beyond simply asking “How do we get chiropractic included?” and instead asks “What healthcare problem needs to be solved, and how can chiropractic be part of the solution?”

That means building partnerships. Responding to concerns. Finding opportunities where chiropractic expertise adds value. And putting the profession at the table when new healthcare models are being developed.