

# Community First Responders' role in the current and future rural health and care workforce: a mixed-methods study

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## Plain language summary

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# Plain language summary

## Background

Community First Responders are volunteers who attend emergencies, particularly in rural areas, and provide help until the ambulance arrives.

## Research aims

We aimed to describe Community First Responder activities, costs and effects and get the views of the public, Community First Responders, ambulance staff and commissioners on the current and future role of Community First Responders.

## Research design

Our study design combined different approaches. We examined routine ambulance patient information, reviewed ambulance policies and guidelines, and gathered information from interviews to make sense of our findings. Through interviews we learned about ways that the work of Community First Responders had been enhanced or could be improved. In a 1-day workshop, a group of lay and professional experts ranked in order of importance ideas about future developments involving Community First Responders.

## Research findings

Community First Responders arrived before ambulance staff for a higher proportion of calls in rural than in urban areas. They attended people with various conditions, including breathing problems, chest pain, stroke, drowsiness, diabetes and falls, and usually the highest-priority emergencies but also lower-priority calls. Policies aimed to ensure that Community First Responders provided safe, effective care. Costs, mainly used for management, training and equipment, were sometimes incomplete or inaccurate and varied widely between services. Community First Responders attending meant faster responses and positive experiences for those patients and relatives interviewed. A Community First Responder scheme responding to people who had fallen at home led to fewer ambulances attending and possible financial savings. Survival among people attended because their heart had stopped was no better when Community First Responders arrived early. Interviews revealed why and how Community First Responders volunteered and were trained, what they did and how they felt. Interviewees were largely positive about Community First Responders. Improvements suggested included support from colleagues or counsellors, better communication with ambulance services, technology for communication and locating patients, and better training.

## Conclusions

Community First Responders have benefits in terms of response times and patient care. Future improvements should be evaluated.

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