

2025-2026 PROPOSED BUDGET
POLICY CONSIDERATIONS PAPER

SEATTLE FIRE DEPARTMENT (SFD)

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This paper highlights a single piece of legislation submitted by the Seattle Fire Department (SFD) with the 2025-2026 Proposed Budget. Other considerations related to SFD may surface as Central Staff continues its analysis of the proposed budget. For more information about SFD's 2025-2026 Proposed Budget, please see the 2025-2026 Proposed Budget Overview Papers.

1. Policy Consideration 1: BLS Transport Fees ORD

This ordinance would authorize the collection of fees for basic life services (BLS) provided by SFD firefighters. SFD contracts with a private vendor, American Medical Response (AMR) for the BLS transportation by ambulance of those needing care to a hospital or clinic. BLS transportation ("transport") is distinct from Advanced Life Support (ALS) transport, which occurs when SFD directly transports an individual with a life-threatening condition in a City-operated aid car. BLS transport occurs after SFD firefighters have provided on-scene BLS or emergency medical services (EMS) services. For individuals it transports who have insurance, either privately or through a government program, AMR seeks reimbursement for its costs from these insurance programs or companies and from copayments billed to individuals.¹ AMR charges the full copayment amount but also offers payment plans to individuals who do not have insurance or who are experiencing financial hardship. Sixteen percent of these accounts are eventually sent to collections.

Occasionally (approximately ten times a month) an AMR unit is not available and SFD provides this transport in a department aid car. Unlike AMR, SFD does not currently seek insurance reimbursement to cover its costs for providing transport service. With its proposed effective date of January 1, 2025, SFD estimates that this ordinance, if passed by Council, would generate aggregate new reimbursement revenue of \$314,000 in 2025.

There are 22 fire agencies within King County, including the Seattle Fire Department. Eighteen of them offer some degree of BLS transport, and 17 of these agencies bill for the BLS transport services they provide. SFD is the only agency in King County that provides BLS transport with no associated billing or cost recovery. The structure and level of the proposed new SFD fee is consistent with that levied by other local fire agencies: \$950 per transport plus \$15 per mile.

SFD would operationalize this proposed new authority by executing a contract with a local third-party billing service (the 2025 Proposed Budget includes funding to establish this contract). That service would bill individuals on behalf of SFD and retain a per-transport fee to cover its own costs. This model is typical for fire agencies that bill for BLS transport.

The proposed legislation establishes a City policy that ability to pay is not a condition of BLS transport service. It specifies that "all aspects of emergency medical services the City currently provides, including BLS transport, shall be provided to all patients without discrimination toward

¹ AMR's current copayment charge is \$3460 plus \$49.50 per mile.

those with no or inadequate ability to pay.” It also specifies that any individual receiving BLS transport from SFD who does not supply the City with the necessary information and documentation to bill the individual’s insurance provider shall be billed for the entire fee, as is required by law. SFD intends that all such individuals are simultaneously allowed to complete a hardship waiver. Relatedly, SFD also intends to create a “compassionate care” financial assistance program, with a sliding scale that takes into account individuals’ ability to pay, as part of its implementation of the proposed BLS transport billing program.

SFD has not yet finalized its policies and processes related to the proposed new legislation, which would include training for the SFD firefighters who would provide BLS transport via aid car. Its communications strategy around the proposed new policy is also still under development, with anticipated implementation in early 2025. SFD has also not completed a Language Access Plan related to the proposed new legislation. As a result, SFD anticipates that it will not begin collecting the proposed BLS transport fees until early spring, which would decrement the full-year revenues as forecast in the fiscal note accompanying this legislation and referenced above.

At some fire agencies across the country, all BLS transport is provided by uniformed fire department staff rather than by a contracted ambulance company. This legislation does not contemplate that possibility for SFD. Those agencies are generally much smaller than SFD, and they are located in states that have established different policies around the administration of the federal Ground Emergency Medical Transportation (GEMT) program, which offers reimbursements from Medicaid funds to public and private EMS agencies. Additionally, City Budget Office (CBO) analysis suggests that the one-time and ongoing costs of provisioning SFD as the sole Seattle provider of BLS services would preclude full cost recovery for the City on any time horizon.

The number of individuals requiring BLS transport by SFD, should Council pass this ordinance, is very small, and only a subset of them will receive a bill for this service. However, receiving a bill, which could easily be in excess of \$1,000, could be a worrying experience for them, particularly if their financial resources are limited or if they are daunted by the prospect of engaging with their insurance provider. SFD intends that bills will include contact information about available financial assistance. Individuals receiving bills may also contact Councilmember offices to seek further assistance.

Council may wish to amend the effective date of this legislation, postponing the effective date of the legislation to align with SFD’s development of policies and processes and a Language Access Plan and with the implementation of its communication plan. Council may also wish to request that SFD prepare a report, or make a presentation to the Public Safety Committee, providing an overview of the deliverables listed above and the compassionate care financial assistance program, prior to the legislation’s effective date.

Options:

- A. Pass
- B. Amend and pass
- C. Do not pass