

# COMMUNITY IMPACT

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## How Houston-area emergency services departments are helping train Alaska's future paramedics



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Alaska native Sean O'Connor will soon be a full-time paramedic in his home state. As part of his education program, he traveled over 4,000 miles to train at Emergency Services District 11 in northwest Harris County, which he said has a larger population than the entire state of Alaska.

"It's been a great learning opportunity coming down here. It's just helping reinforce all the stuff you learn in school. To actually see it in person is super helpful," he said.

### In a nutshell

O'Connor is a student at Kenai Peninsula College, a satellite campus of the University of Alaska Anchorage. Before graduating from the school's paramedic program, students must leave the state to complete a 480-hour capstone internship.

Program director Paul Perry was a full-time paramedic and firefighter when university officials asked him in 2004 to develop an associate of applied science degree in paramedic technology. About 170 students have completed the program, which is now in its 20th year, he said.

"It's important for students to see things other than Alaska," Perry said. "We can talk about it in class, but until you have a patient who has a snake bite, or until you have a patient who's suffering from a heat emergency, those are things that we can't even teach outside of a textbook up here."

### Diving in deeper

Capstone internships take place in several different states, including four departments in the Greater Houston area:

- Harris County ESD 11
- Fort Bend Emergency Medical Service
- Montgomery County Hospital District

Harris County Emergency Corps



Sean O'Connor, a paramedic student from Alaska, spent six weeks in January and February training at Harris County ESD 11. (Danica Lloyd/Community Impact)

Perry said emergency services departments in Texas are among the most advanced in the U.S. when it comes to protocols, research and technology.

The higher call volume is the primary reason students benefit from Houston-area internships, he said. Departments in Alaska might get one or two calls a day for their entire city, while O'Connor said he experienced as many as 14 calls per shift during his time in Houston.

"We send students to Texas for several different reasons, but probably the biggest one is Alaska's huge when it comes to land mass, but our busiest department in Alaska is running nothing compared to the departments in the Houston area," Perry said.

### What's next

After the six-week internship, students return to take their final exams and national registry exams.

While many students—including O'Connor—return home to serve as full-time paramedics in Alaska, others have been hired in the Houston area after training with local departments, Perry said.