

Rapid Lesson Sharing

Event Type: EMS Credentials Falsification

Date: July 13, 2026

Location: North of Lake City, Colorado

Elk Fire EMS Credentials Falsification

How do you handle a situation in which you suspect someone doesn't have the qualifications he or she claims to possess?



The burned slopes of the Elk Fire.

Background

The Elk Fire in Hinsdale County, Colorado, was burning in exceptionally steep and rugged terrain. Its Forward Operating Base (FOB) was 55 miles from the nearest hospital in Gunnison, Colorado.

The Medical Unit Leader (MEDL) reported directly to Safety. The Elk Fire's Safety Officer Trainee SOFR(t) explains: *"I supported medical resources that would be more useful in challenging terrain. The focus was to be on Med Modules or REMS teams that could quickly gain access to our crews."*

Because there were numerous other fires burning at the same time in drought-stricken Colorado, many of the Incident Management Team's (IMT) orders for extraction teams and line-qualified paramedics went unfilled. Thus, when the MEDL was able to secure a Type 2 Rapid Extraction Module Support (REMS) team for the fire, he was thrilled.

Per the MEDL's order, this four-person line-qualified team would arrive with: extrication capabilities, at least two paramedics, four rope rescue technicians, and a Firefighter Type 1 (FFT1) team lead. Having this team of highly-trained rescuers in place would provide a much-needed layer of support in the event of an accident or medical emergency on the Elk Fire.

Narrative

When the Elk Fire's MEDL first met the incoming REMS team lead—identified as "DS" in this RLS—at the Incident Command Post (ICP) on July 13, his *"spidey sense started tingling"* that something wasn't right.

The "would-be" paramedic did not appear to be physically fit. His offhanded claims of having served in the Army in Iraq and Afghanistan seemed patently false to the MEDL, who is an Army veteran. Despite his misgivings, the MEDL sent DS to a hotel for the night, as the other three REMS team members wouldn't arrive until the following day.

Further evidence of DS's potential dishonesty surfaced the next morning when he checked in alongside an ambulance on loan from the nearby Gold Mountain Fire. He bragged of having served on the Gold Mountain Fire,

“If I can’t trust you to tell the truth, how am I going to trust you to do patient care? The entire relationship relies on getting accurate information from the field through these medics.”

describing his recent heroic effort to swim out to a downed helicopter in a reservoir. The ambulance crew replied, *“Oh, then you’ll know our Medical Unit Leader. Let’s text him a picture!”*

“No, no!” replied DS. *“He’s mad at me. Don’t send my picture!”*

As the REMS team checked in, the tempo at the ICP was busy and the MEDL(t) wanted to get resources in place. Responders were provided with a QR code to efficiently input all their information, including their EMS credentials. This would have included state and national registry numbers for the REMS team members, all of whom represented themselves as qualified paramedics.

Having scanned the QR code—and ostensibly filled in the required information—the REMS team continued on to the Forward Operating Base (FOB) and completed their first day on the fireline.

Serious Issue: Dishonesty Among EMS Providers is a Huge Liability

That evening, the MEDL(t) received a text from the Gold Mountain Fire MEDL. The ambulance crew had relayed the tale that they had heard from DS earlier that day. The Gold Mountain MEDL stated that there was no truth to this story. As far as he knew, DS had never even been on the Gold Mountain Fire.

At this point, the MEDL(t) knew that he had a serious issue, as dishonesty among EMS providers is a huge liability. Noted the MEDL(t) at that time: *“If I can’t trust you to tell the truth, how am I going to trust you to do patient care? The entire relationship relies on getting accurate information from the field through these medics.”*

The MEDL(t) grabbed his computer and began reviewing DS’s credentials. While the other three REMS team members had inputted their medical licenses at check-in, DS’s information was missing. He texted DS, who replied that he had already submitted the required information, but that he would send it again.

DS then sent a National Registry Paramedic number that, when cross-referenced, returned to a different name.

Confronted with this fact over speaker phone with both the MEDL and MEDL(t) present, an incredulous DS replied *“Oh my god, is this still happening?! This has been going on for a year!”*

Efforts to obtain a physical copy of DS’s paramedic card were similarly unproductive as he stated that his phone wasn’t working and that he couldn’t get the documents to send.

The Need to Take Action and Operate Cautiously

The MEDLs dug further into DS’s credentials. A Google search revealed that the Nevada state license number DS provided was the same number that is displayed on a generic Nevada State Paramedic license example online. They also found a picture of the actual medic to whom the National Registry paramedic number belonged. They were

Nevada State EMS Licensing Online Application Portal

Account Login
Education
Lookup
Personnel
Services

Public Personnel Lookup
Enter any search criteria to find the public profile of any other personnel.

Certification Number: 57740
First Name:
Last Name:
National EMS ID:

Search Clear

Search Results

Name	Certification Number	Expiration Date	Certification Status	Certification Level
No Records				

Records 0-0 of 0 First/Previous/Next/Last Page/0 - Per Page/10

Nevada EMS Program
4126 Technology Way, STE 300, Carson City, NV 89706
(775) 687-7900
<https://www.dph.nv.gov/regulatory/emergency-medical-systems/ems/>

Nevada State EMS Provider Portal. Both state and national EMS licenses are searchable online by name or certification number.

aghast at the drastic physical differences between the two men. *“My initial reaction,”* mused the MEDL, *“[was] if you’re going to do something this stupid, you need to get better at it!”*

By 2300 hours, the SOFR(t) and Incident Commander (IC) had heard the entire story. The team discussed the need to take decisive action while operating cautiously. Was this a criminal offense? And was DS even who he said he was? Moreover, how could they keep the 200-plus firefighters at the FOB safe from whatever fallout might occur from a confrontation with DS?

It was clear that DS could not spend time on the line again. The team decided that the SOFR(t) would call the sheriff’s office first thing in the morning. In the meantime, they would hold the REMS team back the next day by casually asking the entire field medical group to come to Finance after morning briefing because of an issue with a personnel order number.

(There was, in fact, a legitimate issue with the Resource Order number of one of the line paramedics.) They would request the REMS team to pack and bring their gear due to the possibility of demobilization. This way there would be no reason for DS to subsequently return to the FOB.

The group kept this information to themselves as much as possible. A couple of key notifications did take place.

First, the MEDL called the owners of the company for which DS worked. He had a previous relationship with these contractors and trusted their discretion. The company owners sent him rope rescue certificates and an Advanced CPR card for DS, but did not produce a paramedic license.

They agreed that they did not want DS out on the line and assured the MEDL that they would send a replacement for him as soon as possible. Next, the MEDL(t) called the field MEDL at the FOB and updated him on the situation, emphasizing that the information was to remain confidential. At the direction of the SOFR(t), he also asked the MEDL to get DS’s license plate number—just in case DS were to flee before morning.

DS Departs Fire with County Law Enforcement

Late that evening, the MEDL could not sleep. He reached out via social media to the medic whose national number DS had claimed. To his surprise, he received a prompt reply along with a photo of DS captioned *“Is this him?”* The MEDL was stunned to learn that this impersonation had been ongoing for more than a year. The “real” medic sent abundant documentation to show that he was in fact the actual licensed paramedic.

The following morning at 0600 hours the SOFR(t) called the sheriff. In advance of the REMS team’s arrival, the MEDL(t) sat outside at a picnic table and pretended to work on his laptop. When the REMS team arrived at approximately 0830 hours, he sent them to the Finance section, but asked DS to come with him to an adjacent conference room at the front of the ICP. There, DS met, was interviewed by, and subsequently departed the fire with county law enforcement.

The REMS team and an incoming MEDL were briefed on the situation as soon as they were separated from DS. A replacement REMS team member arrived later that afternoon, ensuring that the REMS team only missed one operational period as a result of this incident.



The Forward Operating Base (FOB) where the REMS team was stationed along with approximately 200 other firefighters.

Lessons

1. Trust your instincts when you feel that something is out of place. The follow-up on this incident has been overwhelming. Numerous first responders have stated that DS was on previous incidents in many different roles where they had concerns about his EMS and firefighting credentials, yet it's unclear whether anyone took the extra time to investigate or raise concerns to the right individuals.
2. Have the willingness to communicate both intra- and inter-incidents, which ties into the old motto of *"See Something; Say Something."* This starts at a basic level. The extra time that the Gold Mountain Fire ambulance crew and then the Gold Mountain Fire MEDL took to follow-up with the Elk Fire Incident Management Team was integral to the discovery of DS's credentials falsification.
3. There is a reason that Task Books, the Incident Response Pocket Guide (IRPG), and many other industry manuals discuss Duty, Integrity, Respect and other core values of all-hazard responders. Maintaining the public trust is essential. There is a responsibility to live up to those values. And we need to be able to trust that the people in the field and at every level will live up to those values.
4. The safety of firefighters and other fire resources is the most important priority in a situation like this. Confronting DS away from the FOB with law enforcement present was an important tactical decision.
5. Having REMS teams on a fire is an effort to mitigate risk. However, rushing the process to get them in place can lead to actually creating more risk on your operation. The MEDL(t) noted: *"We ordered this team three days ago. I could take 20 minutes to double check credentials."* EMS licensing happens outside of the Interagency Resource Ordering Capability (IROC) system. Therefore, additional extra scrutiny may be in order.
6. Contractors and cooperators have a different system for self-reporting qualifications. It's worth understanding this difference and double-checking individual qualifications where appropriate, even though contractors and cooperators are contractually responsible for validating their own employee credentials.

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