

A lesson learned: What you should know about reciprocity

By Scott W. Mailhes, EMT-B

When I moved to Houston in January 2001, I was a thousand miles from my hometown, living temporarily with my brother and his wife, and without a job. What I did have was a sense of conviction to join a fire department training class, and a National Registry EMT-basic card.

I began asking how to practice as an EMT in Texas: What do I need? Who is hiring? Does Texas recognize National Registry? It seemed like a million questions and a million answers. I eventually spoke to a staff member with the Texas Department of Health (TDH, now the Texas Department of State Health Services, or DSHS) in Houston to get the answers. I was told to fill out this form and that form, and in a few weeks I would receive a notice saying that I have a year of “reciprocity” to practice in Houston as an EMT.

Jump forward three years. I am done with fire school and riding as an EMT for a private ambulance company to make ends meet while I look to local departments for employment. I am unloading a patient for hemodialysis treatment when I am approached by a representative of the city of Houston’s Department of Health and Human Services. He is doing spot inspections on ambulance crews. He asks for my certifications. I am happy to provide him with my National Registry EMT card. He asks for my

Texas Department of Health EMT card. I do not have one.

Jump forward a few weeks. I am now unable to practice as an EMT. I have no job. The company I was riding with as an EMT is subject to fines because I worked on their ambulance. I cannot apply for a job with the fire department without my EMT certification. My career in Texas is seemingly over.

Jump forward a year. I appear before a committee to defend my case as to why I wasn’t carrying the proper certifications as an EMT-basic in Texas. It is a tale of confusion. It is my tale. I am writing about it because I am not alone in this predicament. For whatever reasons, someone else may find themselves confused as to how to obtain the proper certifications in Texas when moving from out of state. Here is my advice.

Use the internet. I did not (I am technologically challenged). When I moved to Texas, I ended up changing residences three times in the first 18 months. In this nomadic existence, I lost paperwork concerning my “reciprocity” year with DSHS. I therefore never became aware that my certification was no longer valid.

All the information you need is on the DSHS website: (www.dshs.state.tx.us/emstraumasystems). Click on the Certification/Licensure Applications tab. Once there, click on “Reciprocity Certification” to

get the information you need to obtain your reciprocity license. The website is easy to navigate and, of course, contact phone numbers are listed in case you have any questions. That was easy, right? It took me two minutes from my first Google search to clicking on the proper information. I accomplished in two minutes what caused me a year of unemployment as an EMT.

Be smart. Ask questions. Use the resources made available by DSHS. And, first and foremost, do not rely on the answers given to you by colleagues or employers. If they do not work for DSHS, don’t take their advice. I was told many different things. I was hired by a company with my National Registry EMT card and was never required to show a Texas EMT card. I was told by fellow EMTs that a National Registry card was all you needed to practice in Houston. In other words, I was told many conflicting things that led to all this mess. The responsibility was ultimately mine, though. I asked the right questions of the wrong people.

I hope this article helps anybody moving to Texas from out of state. This is a great state in which to live, and, after appealing to the DSHS with my story, I am once again working as an EMT in Houston. But don’t take the route I took to get your license. It’s not worth it.