2026 EMS Compensation & Workforce Trends

Insights from the Academy of International Mobile Healthcare Integration (AIMHI) Total Compensation Survey
November 2026 | Industry Summary Report

Executive Summary

Recruiting, compensating, and retaining a highly skilled EMS workforce remains one of the most significant operational and financial challenges facing ambulance service organizations. As agencies balance increasing personnel costs, reimbursement limitations, changing workforce expectations, and the demands of delivering high-quality patient care, reliable compensation benchmarking has become an essential management resource.

To better understand compensation practices among high-performance EMS organizations, the Academy of International Mobile Healthcare Integration (AIMHI) commissioned its 2026 Total Compensation Survey, jointly sponsored by the Mecklenburg EMS Agency (MEDIC) and conducted by Willis Towers Watson (WTW). Building on a similar 2023 study, the survey examined compensation programs and practices across 40 positions.

The findings reveal several important workforce compensation trends:

- Median projected 2027 **merit increases** generally range **from 2.8% to 3.0%**.
- Experience-based compensation formulas are widely used.
- Promotional compensation practices vary, and formal policies are not universally adopted.
- A majority use shift differentials, although program design varies.
- One-time shift bonuses and other premium pay practices are less common.

Compensation decisions should be informed by reliable market data, organizational financial capacity, and long-term workforce strategy, not simply by what the neighboring ambulance service announced last Tuesday.

Merit Increases: Planning for 2027

The survey examined actual 2026 merit increase budgets and projected 2027 budgets across employee classifications.

Employee Classification	Average Projected Increase	Median Projected Increase
Executive	3.6%	3.0%
Management	3.6%	3.0%
Exempt employees	3.5%	3.0%
Non-exempt/hourly employees	3.3%	2.8%

Implications for EMS leaders. Merit increase budgets should be considered alongside market competitiveness, employee turnover, recruitment challenges, and financial sustainability. Agencies should distinguish routine merit adjustments from targeted market corrections, which address different needs.

Recognizing Experience in Starting Compensation

Seventy-one percent of participating organizations reported using new-hire experience formulas. Although designs vary, **employees generally receive approximately 1.5% to 3.0% above the starting pay rate per year of recognized experience**.

Implications for EMS leaders. Experience-based compensation can support recruitment of seasoned clinicians but can create internal equity and salary compression challenges. Agencies should apply experience-credit policies consistently and periodically compare new-hire compensation with incumbent pay.

Promotional Compensation: Moving Up Should Mean More Than Additional Responsibility

Promotional compensation measure	Reported result
Average promotional increase	11%
Median promotional increase	8%
25th percentile	5%
75th percentile	12%
Organizations reporting formal promotional pay policies	29%

Implications for EMS leaders. Formal promotional policies can improve transparency and consistency while recognizing increased accountability. Becoming a supervisor should ideally involve more than inheriting the staffing schedule, the complaint inbox, and a radio that never stops transmitting.

Shift Differentials: Compensating for Operational Demands

Fifty-seven percent of participating organizations reported using shift differentials. Night shifts were the most common application, with weekend, holiday, and 24-hour shift differentials also reported. **Examples included $2–$3 per hour, $100–$400 per pay period, or percentage increases of 5%–20%**.

Implications for EMS leaders. Targeted differentials may help fill less desirable shifts, but their effectiveness should be measured against staffing availability, overtime reliance, retention, and total labor costs.

Premium Pay and One-Time Shift Bonuses

Compensation Practice	Organizations Reporting Use
Premium pay policies	29%
Geographic pay differentials	14%
One-time shift bonuses	29%

Among organizations with premium pay policies, additional compensation typically ranged from 5% to 15% of base salary. **Reported one-time shift bonuses ranged from $50 to $300**.

Implications for EMS leaders. Incentives may provide short-term flexibility, but repeated reliance on bonuses may increase costs without addressing underlying recruitment, staffing, or retention issues.

Five Things EMS Leaders Should Do Next

1. **Conduct a compensation competitiveness review.** Compare compensation with relevant EMS, fire, hospital, and healthcare labor markets.
2. **Evaluate compensation compression and internal equity.** Review starting pay, experience credits, promotional increases, and incumbent compensation.
3. **Incorporate trends into 2027 financial planning.** Model merit increases, market adjustments, benefit costs, overtime, and incentives against realistic revenue.
4. **Assess the effectiveness of shift incentives.** Measure coverage, overtime, vacancies, and retention rather than relying on anecdotal impressions.
5. **Establish a long-term workforce compensation strategy.** Integrate compensation with career development, employee engagement, recruitment, retention, and sustainability.

Study Methodology and Limitations

WTW conducted the 2026 AIMHI Total Compensation Survey between July and September 2026, sponsored by MEDIC. The survey covered 40 positions and reported base salary data were effective May 1, 2026. WTW summarized compensation findings for items with participation from at least five organizations.

The participating organizations are a small, selected group, not a statistically representative sample of the entire EMS industry. Practices may differ by geography, labor market, organizational structure, collective bargaining arrangements, and other factors. These findings are directional insights, not universal compensation standards. No organization-specific or position-level compensation data are included in this public summary.

Conclusion

The survey reinforces the importance of thoughtful, data-informed compensation planning in high-performance EMS. Recognizing experience, maintaining competitive base compensation, establishing consistent promotional practices, and using targeted staffing incentives are interconnected elements of a sustainable workforce strategy. Ultimately, high-performance EMS depends on high-performing people, and attracting and retaining those people requires more than an excellent deployment model.

About AIMHI

The Academy of International Mobile Healthcare Integration (AIMHI) is an association of high-performance EMS and mobile healthcare organizations committed to advancing innovation, operational excellence, clinical quality, financial sustainability, and integration with the broader healthcare system. Through benchmarking, research, education, and collaboration, AIMHI supports high-performance EMS and mobile healthcare delivery.

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Source: WTW, 2026 AIMHI Total Compensation Survey – Participant's Report, September 2026.
Publication note: This summary presents selected aggregated insights and excludes confidential organization-specific and position-level compensation data.