

Highlighting FirstWatch, NEMSQA's 1st Corporate Sponsor

FirstWatch is an EMS systems analysis tool that draws data from multiple sources and provides agencies with feedback in almost real-time. The company is a vital corporate sponsor to NEMSQA, promoting quality improvement in EMS nationwide!

Todd Stout, Founder and President, was an EMT, paramedic, and flight medic in Oklahoma City before shifting into software development. Mike Taigman, Improvement Guide, worked as a paramedic in Denver for ten years before becoming a national leader in quality improvement. Together they have 90 years of experience in EMS!



What motivated Todd to start FirstWatch?

Todd: I really want to have people use information to make decisions, and in EMS we tend to just go with our gut. So I set out to make a way for a computer to do all the stuff that the computer can do well, to save the human for the stuff that needs to be done well by humans. People go to work to do a good job. They will try to do better if you treat them reasonably and fairly and give them feedback. If you give them the information they need to change something while it's fresh in their minds, they'll do it, especially in EMS and public safety. It's easy to get excited about the stuff we're doing because it matters. We can have a broad impact and make the world a better place by helping.

Mike: We're really the partner to help make EMS better. Whether that's better for patients from a clinical and service perspective, better for employees working in the EMS system, or better for organizations, we offer our improvement support primarily through a data lens, and help leadership make meaningful changes using improvement science.

What advice would you give to someone who wants to enter the field of EMS?

Mike: Maintain and nurture your curiosity. If you're curious and anticipate connecting and learning something with every encounter you have, all of your interfacility transfers, all your sprained ankle calls, they can all be interesting and fun. The antidote to cynicism, burnout, and boredom is being intensely curious.

Todd: The kind of EMS that I did involved people more than it involved medicine or transports. If you like people, then you don't get frustrated when the mom who's got a new baby, and doesn't have a car or a thermometer, is scared because her baby feels hot. You can feel that person, you can be empathetic and you can realize that's helping too. The idea of being more medicine-oriented is good, but Medicine includes everything the patient needs, which is not just medicine. So if you're going to get into EMS, do it because you like people. And then, if you're curious and you work hard, if you're someone to take on projects and try to fix things, there's no end to what you can do.

What's one project you're especially proud of?

Mike: I've got two that bounce to mind. One is our opioid work with our medical director Silvia Verdugo. She's a Master of Public Health in addition to being a physician, and did full-time opioid-related work and research. She's spent enough time looking at it to understand how to identify opioid overdoses from EMS records better than anybody else in the world. Her expertise led to us doing similar work for customers in Lowell, Massachusetts, where we quickly alert a support team to activate after an overdose. The team responds to get patients the longer-term care that they need. We also published Silvia's work on how to identify opioid overdoses in EMS data, and gave it away free to the whole world. We did that because we want to save more lives and have more people get the benefit of the data. Now any electronic medical record system, law enforcement agency, or treatment facility has access to those resources.

Mike: The other one is we built a clinical quality improvement module called FirstPass, which lets EMS organizations answer the question, "What percentage of our acute patients were cared for in the same way that our medical director would have cared for them if they were on scene?" It gives people a real view of their real care, which is oftentimes different than the fantasy that care is always in line with protocols or trainings. It gives people an instantaneous way to analyze their performance across the board, and shows the gaps between where they are and where they could be. We've used it to look for disparities in care, whether they're based on race, ethnicity, birth sex, geography, those kinds of things. I've often said that there's two kinds of EMS systems. There are EMS systems that provide disparate care to people based on their race, ethnicity, and gender, and there are EMS systems that haven't looked at their data. FirstPass is the infrastructure to help shine a light on something that is vitally important, and really equip people with the tools to close those gaps and make meaningful improvements.

What's something that's special or unique about FirstWatch?

Todd: We approach data from a different perspective, which is that it's really important and valuable, but it's dirty. It's always gonna be dirty, and everybody's needs, even if the data wasn't dirty, are gonna be different. That's why we go into it saying, "Here's your data, let us just help you." Our values are, "Genuine, caring, and can-do." And that's the point. If you can capture the data, we can probably do what you need with it. But we genuinely want to know how to help you. You as a person who's trying to do a good job, and your company or organization that's trying to help people. We genuinely care.

Todd: I believe that if we take care of our teammates, take care of our customers, and make enough money to keep doing that, that's our deal. That results in about 20-25% annual growth over 25 years. The side-effect of taking care of your team, your customers, and making enough money to do that is continuing to grow. It's not a ton of money because we're a low-profit, long-term thing. It's like EMS: you're not doing it for money, but you're making a difference and doing it right. We're not trying to grow, but we're growing. We're trying to do the right thing and the right thing pays off.

What do you like to do outside of work?

Mike: Concerts are at the top of my list of fun things to do. My first concert was Alice Cooper's Welcome to my Nightmare with Suzie Quattro as the opener in 1974. More importantly, my first Grateful Dead concert was at Red Rocks in 1978.

Todd: Some combination of hanging out with my family, and also during Covid I learned that I really enjoy woodworking. I am learning a ton, and gradually adding to my tools. I look forward to having a full-blown shop someday!