

Ambulance Services

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Background

While ambulance services are a critical component of emergency medical care, cost of ambulance transportation is unaffordable to many. In 2019, Colorado passed surprise billing legislation that protects health care consumers from receiving high out-of-network bills. This law did not include ground ambulance services, which prompted a Colorado legislator to request this data in an effort to expand the surprise billing law to include ambulance services.

Research Objective

Using data from the Colorado All Payer Claims Database (CO APCD), we looked at the following key questions:

- 1

What are the statewide and regional utilization rates of ambulance services?
- 2

What are the median amounts paid for ambulance services across regions and over time?
- 3

What percent of ambulance services are billed in-network vs out-of-network?
- 4

How do commercial payments for ambulance services compare to Medicare Fee-For-Service (FFS) payments for the same services?

Study Design

Commercial medical claims from the CO APCD were used to identify trends in utilization and payments for ambulance services. Allowed amounts, member liability amounts, and number of users for various ambulance services between 2018 and 2023 were analyzed by network type and by urban/rural designations. Five ambulance related CPT procedure codes were analyzed:

CPT Code Colors	
A0425	Ground Ambulance Mileage
A0426	Ambulance Service, Advanced Life Support, Non-Emergency Transport
A0427	Ambulance Service, Advanced Life Support, Emergency Transport
A0428	Ambulance Service, Basic Life Support, Non-Emergency Transport
A0429	Ambulance Service, Basic Life Support, Emergency Transport

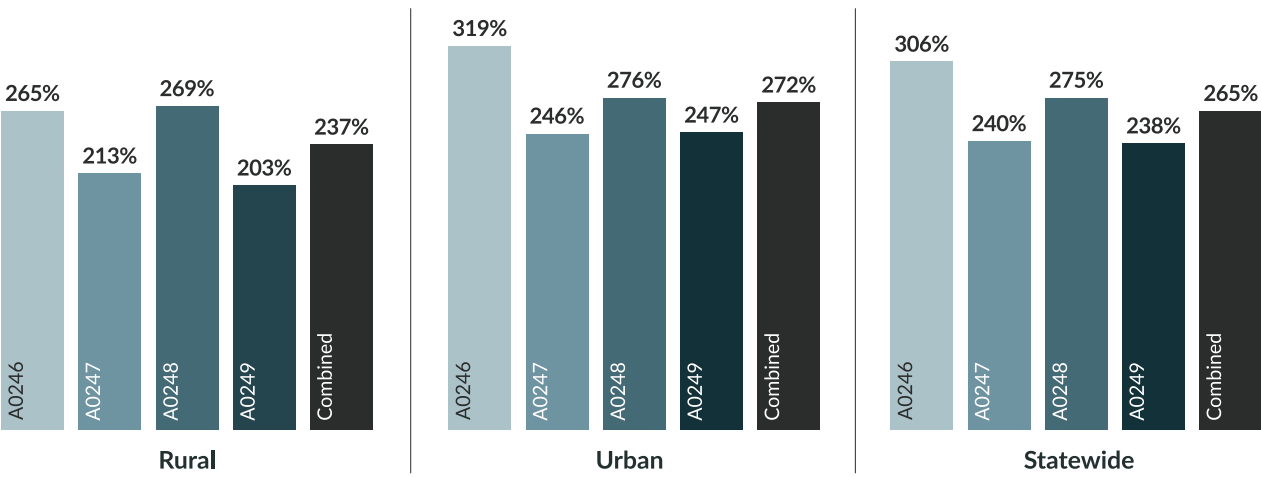
Principle Findings

Commercial Payments as a Percent of Medicare

In 2022, rural areas had lower percent of Medicare payments than statewide or urban areas

Codes and Descriptions	A0426	A0427	A0428	A0429	Combined
	Ambulance service, advanced life support, non-emergency transport	Ambulance service, advanced life support, emergency transport	Ambulance service, basic life support, non-emergency transport	Ambulance service, basic life support, emergency transport	All Codes Combined
Rural	265%	213%	269%	203%	237%
Urban	319%	246%	276%	247%	272%
Statewide	306%	240%	275%	238%	265%

Ambulance services for “Advanced life support, non-emergency transport” has the highest percent of Medicare payments across all regions

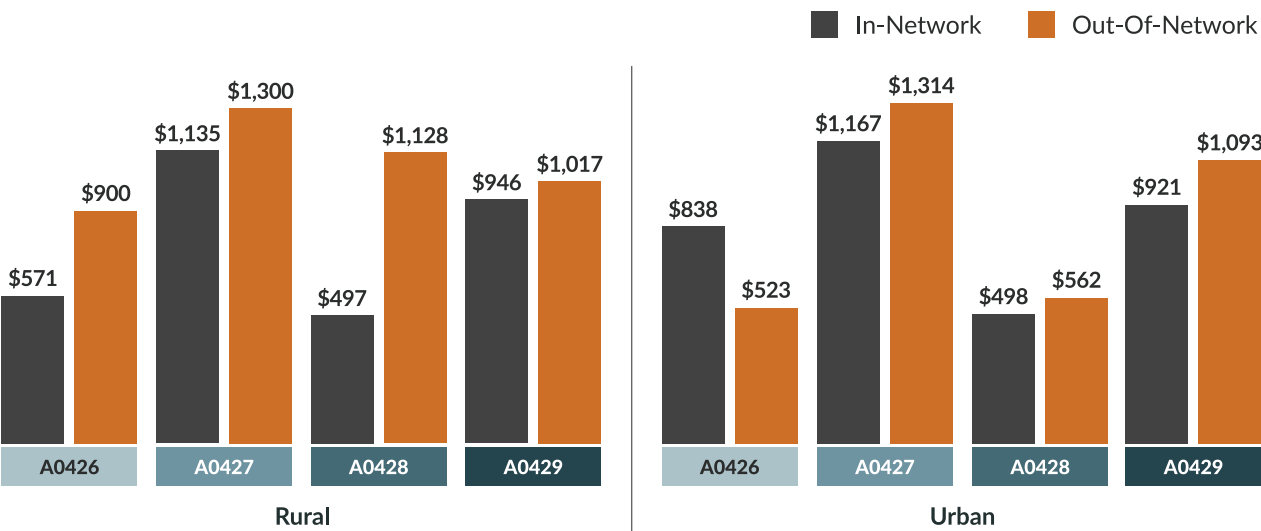


Median Costs by Code, Network Status, and Geography

For all ambulance claims across all years,

- The percent billed as in-network ranges between **40% and 50%**
- The percent billed as out-of-network ranges between **50% and 60%**

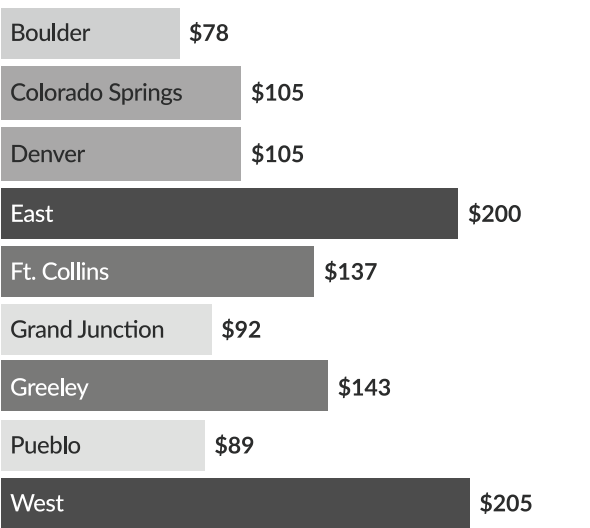
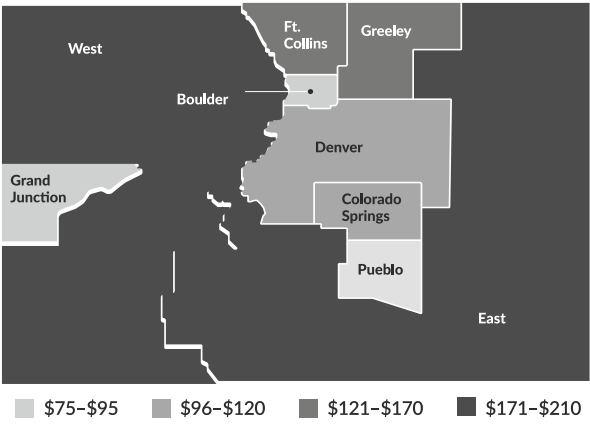
In 2023, the out-of-network costs are almost always greater than in-network costs for all codes and regions, however the disparity is greatest in rural areas. **The greatest disparity is basic life support, non-emergency services in rural areas (\$497 for in-network, \$1,128 for out-of-network)** The median total allowed amounts for advanced life support ambulance services (A0426 and A0427) regularly surpassed \$1000 and were as high as \$1300.



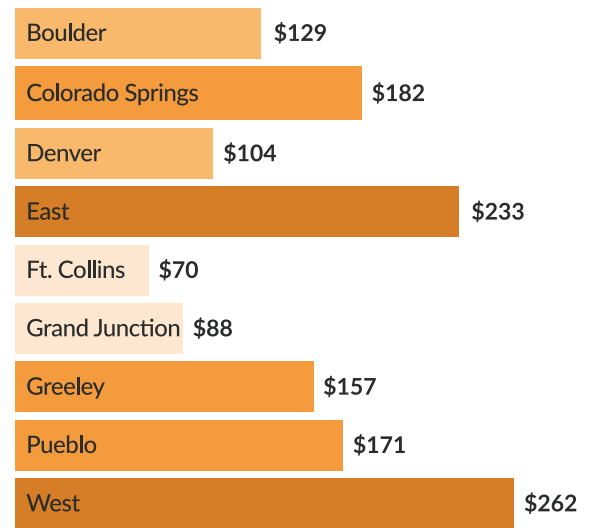
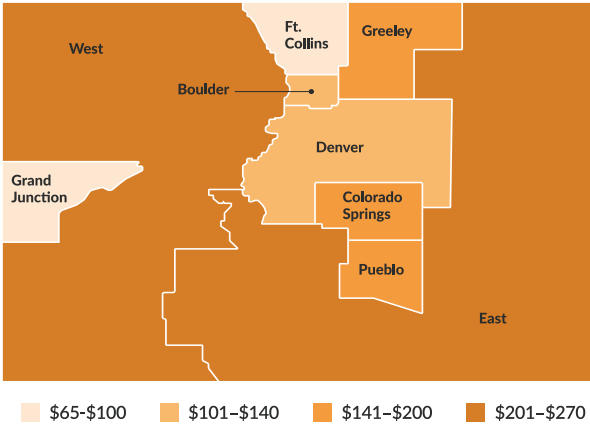
Maps

For both in-network and out-of-network providers, costs for ground ambulance mileage are greatest in rural areas. This is unsurprising as ambulances need to drive longer distances in rural areas to reach a hospital. However, it highlights inequitable access to emergency medical service transportation for rural residents.

Median Allowed Amount | In-Network



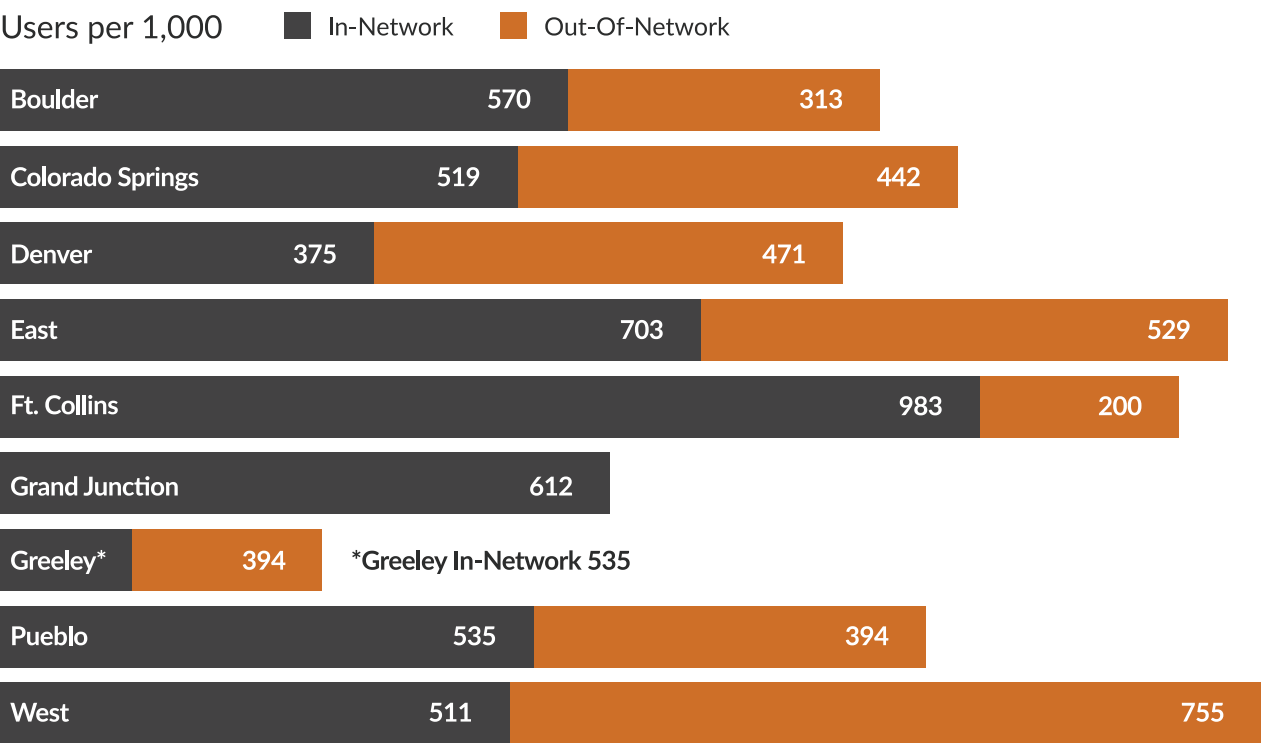
Median Allowed Amount | Out-of-Network



Utilization

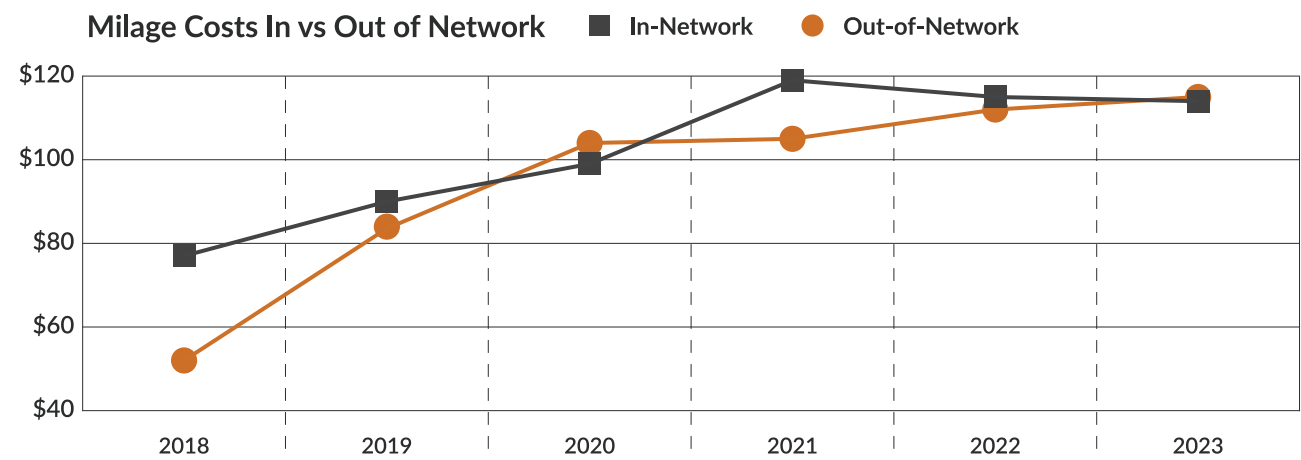
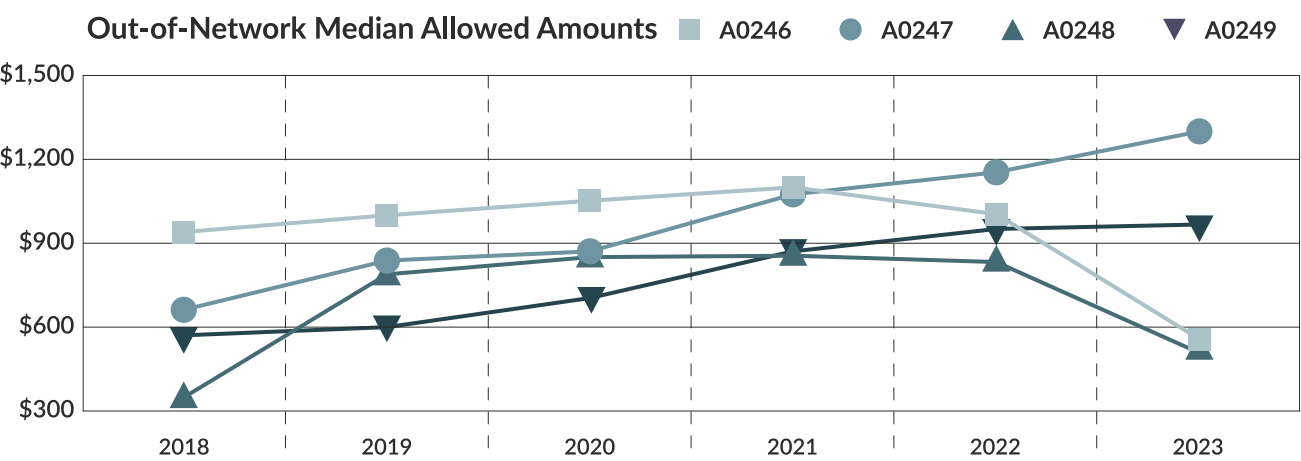
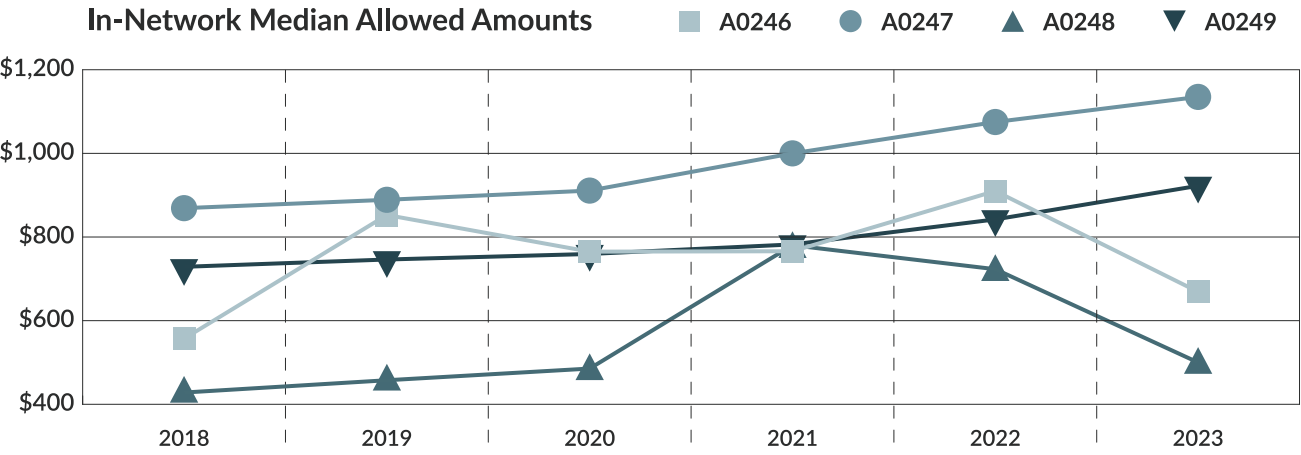
The rural regions (East and West DOI Regions) have the greatest ambulance utilization
Greeley has significantly less utilization than the rest of the state

Ft. Collins has the greatest difference between in-network and out-of-network utilization.



Trends

While ambulance service utilization has remained fairly constant from 2018-2023, costs for all types of ambulance services have been increasing. The most notable increases occurred in mileage costs and costs for emergency transportation.



Conclusion

This analysis provides critical insights into the interplay between ambulance service costs and utilization by network type, payer, and geographic location. By highlighting regional and payer disparities, the study emphasizes the need for policy interventions that improve ambulance service access, equity, and affordability – particularly in underserved rural communities. Data from this analysis supported the introduction of HB 25-1088, “Cost for Ambulance Services”, which, among other policies, establishes out-of-network prices for ambulance services.



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To access the full Ambulance Services abstract and to learn more about public and non-public CO APCD data, visit civhc.org

