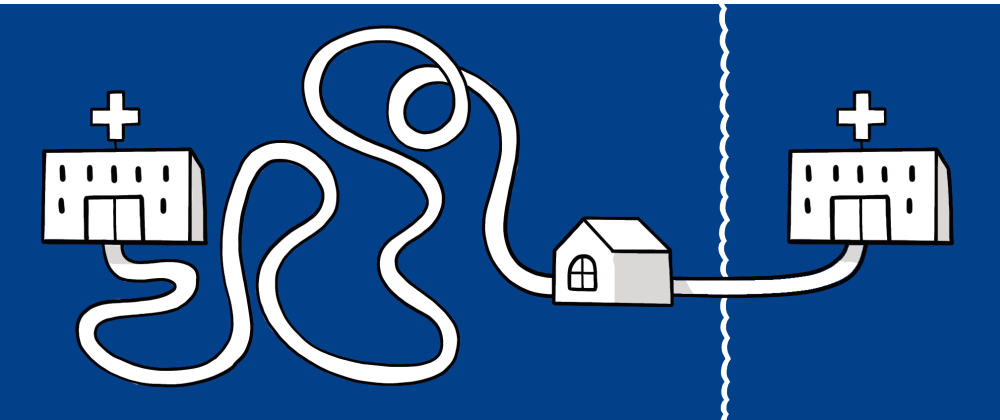


# Ambulances without borders for better emergency services



Mrs. and Mr. De Jong have suffered from a heart condition for several years. In the last few months, Mr. De Jong has had more recurrent symptoms of discomfort in the chest and shortness of breath. While they both do their regular checks, he is increasingly worried about the shortage of services in the region if he needs to quickly reach an emergency room. He is aware that if he has a heart attack, the next 90 minutes are critical, and the closest hospital where he could be treated is across the border. How could emergency health services improve the needs of close-knit communities in different countries that happen to share a border?

While the idea that spurred this project took shape before the COVID-19 pandemic, it has no doubt become increasingly relevant. European governments and the health sector in particular had to face both an enormous amount of pressure and also considerable food for thought on aspects that could improve the delivery of emergency services.

Like many other places in Europe, Woensdrecht is a border municipality. It is located in the south of the Netherlands, bordering Belgium, and has a population of about 20 000 inhabitants. Antwerp, in the province of Noord-Brabant, is the biggest nearby city, about 25 kilometers away. Woensdrecht also shares a border with other Belgian municipalities: Essen, Kalmthout, Kapellen and Stabroek. All of these are comprised of a majority of small towns, which have experienced increasing difficulties in providing emergency health services to their citizens.

Medical emergencies and the need for medical assistance is much more frequent than was previously known. In some cases, ambulances from neighbouring countries can arrive faster than national ones, but it is not clear to which extent they can intervene to provide the necessary assistance due to diverging regulations in the two countries.

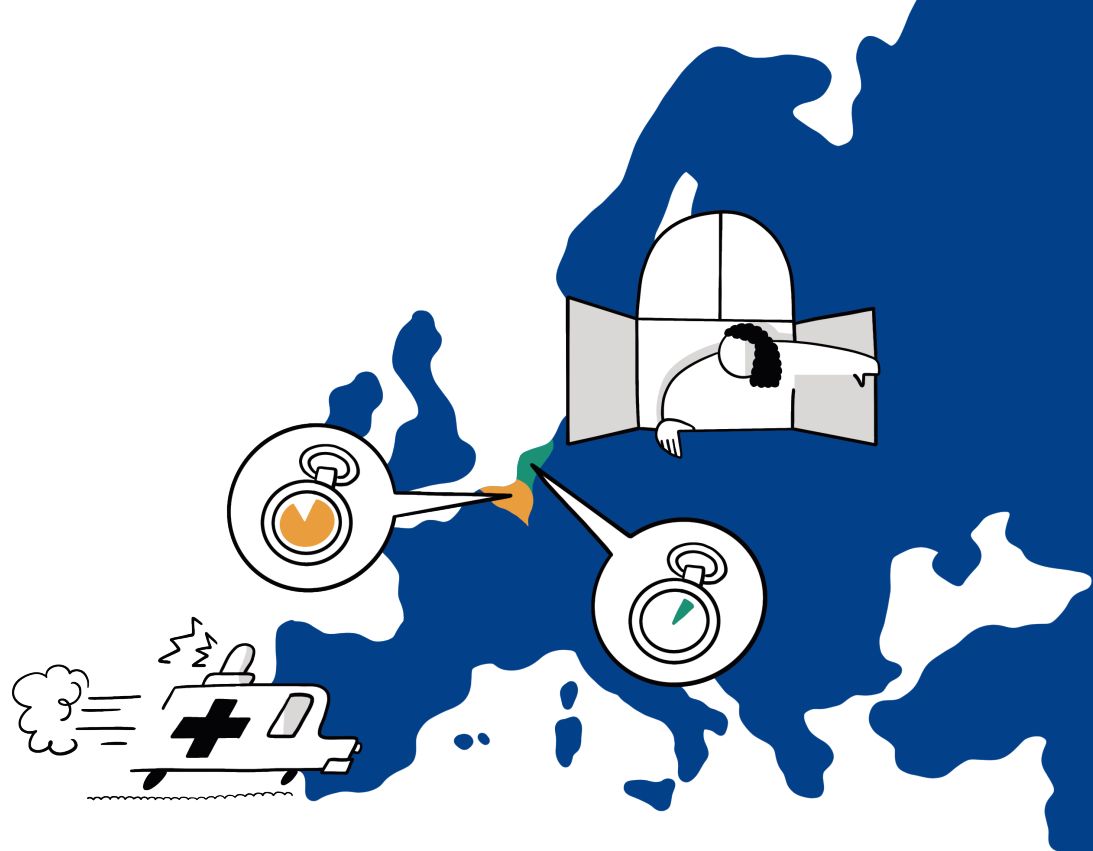
The case of Woensdrecht, unfortunately, reflects the reality in many other places in Europe, as reflected in the *b-solutions* compendium. While the Benelux countries (Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxemburg) have a very long history of structured cooperation in many fields, including a legal mechanism for ambulance transport and cross-border cooperation, the experience of this municipality perfectly illustrates the fact that having legal instruments in place is not always enough. Aspects such as different



technical requirements, the lack of bilateral agreements and diverging standards (e.g., concerning patients' reimbursements) are hindering more efficient service and making it difficult to reach patients in cross-border areas.

At the moment, the municipalities involved are working to reformulate a system of cross-border medical assistance. **Martin Unfried**, from the **ITEM Institute** at **Maastricht University**, describes how

“ different stakeholders, including representatives from the municipalities, emergency services, hospitals, etc., have met regularly to discuss the right structure of the new cooperation, including how to build the necessary administrative capacities, install a secretariat that can coordinate, and determine how to keep the different partners interested to invest in a long-term solution. ”



*b-solutions* has been instrumental in gathering data, identifying stakeholders and searching for options. The next step, with the support of Interreg, is to develop a sustainable solution that partners are committed to, administered by a coordination unit that can ensure a more efficient system of medical assistance that addresses the needs of the people living in border regions between Belgium and the Netherlands.

