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Ex-rescue squad captain offers to return

Calls currently going to Schenectady and Rotterdam

By Justin Mason (Contact)
Gazette Reporter

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DUANESBURG The former captain of the Duanesburg Volunteer Ambulance Corps has agreed to lead the unit again if the acting captain and his wife cease their involvement, she said Monday.

Susan Wengenack, the volunteer who led the company until taking a leave of absence last July, said she would return on the condition that Acting Captain Bruce Smith and his wife, Board of Directors chairman Sharon Smith, agree to retire. The five-year veteran of the company said she was trained to replace Smith in 2006, but took her leave nine months later, after becoming fed up with her leadership being undermined.

“I was exhausted doing calls and doing everything around the station, in addition to listening to Bruce,” she said Monday.

Board member Amy Jo Simpson said the company is still evaluating its options after town officials told state police dispatchers last week to direct all emergency calls to either the Rotterdam Emergency Medical Service or Mohawk Ambulance in Schenectady until further notice. Though unaware of the Smiths’ intentions, she said, Wengenack would be an ideal leader to correct the company’s disarray.

“She has all the qualifications to be a captain and she would put her heart and soul into it,” she said.

Duanesburg officials have set a special meeting to discuss the ambulance service’s future at 6 p.m. Thursday at Town Hall.

Sharon Smith confirmed Monday the company has stopped receiving dispatch calls for emergencies. But in the event the town lifts its directive or the ambulance service is needed, she said, volunteers are continuing to stand by at the station.

“It’s hard to sit there and hear the calls,” she said. “But we’re here listening and we’re

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here waiting.”

Smith said the company is trying to develop a rough schedule when volunteers are available. “We are trying to arrange coverage, but it’s hard to pinpoint exact times,” she said. “It can’t be etched in stone.”

She declined to discuss internal personnel issues.

The nonprofit ambulance company came under fire this month after a dramatic increase in missed calls between December and January, as well as an overall increase in response times. Whenever Duanesburg is unable to respond to a call, mutual aid companies are dispatched from Rotterdam and Schenectady, meaning it sometimes takes more than 20 minutes for an ambulance to arrive.

Company officials blamed the declining performance of the ambulance service on a lack of volunteers. Many former volunteers and even officers from other emergency organizations stated recently that this shortage is made worse by Smith’s overbearing attitude.

The town provides the ambulance service a \$43,000 annual contribution, which amounts to about a third of the company’s overall budget. This year, town officials were contemplating a \$50,000 contract with the company, in addition to \$20,000 held in escrow for reimbursing new medical equipment purchases.

In return, the town asked the company to significantly reduce expenditures, including eliminating one of four ambulances and reducing travel to out-of-town events such as the Iron Man triathlon in Lake Placid. Company officials never responded to the requests.

Last week, members of the Duanesburg Town Board asked to see a roster of when they need shifts covered, so that dispatchers would have an idea when the station isn’t adequately manned.

Jim Stairs, the operating manager of the Rotterdam service, said compiling such a list would allow dispatchers to better direct emergency calls. On days when the company is short volunteers, he said calls could be automatically routed to Schenectady or Rotterdam.

“It’s been done in other places in the region,” he said. “But it requires them to take a full, comprehensive look at when they’re running into these problems.”

Schenectady County Emergency Coordinator Bill VanHoesen said the town is moving in the right direction with the ambulance company. He said the suspension of calls going to the company will provide it the necessary time to get back on track.

“[Town officials] are giving them a breather and allowing them to reorganize,” he said.



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