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Mercy EMS ambulance service ready to roll

By Joanne Beck jbeck@batavianews.com

Thursday, August 6, 2009 1:33 PM EDT

Everything is falling into place for Mercy EMS to begin providing ground ambulance service next month throughout Genesee County, according to Margaret Ferrentino, Mercy EMS vice president and chief financial officer.

The offshoot of Mercy Flight Inc. has obtained its operating certificate from the state Department of Health, hired and scheduled training for nearly 60 employees and sent out contracts to individual jurisdictions in the county, Ferrentino said Thursday.

"We've made a significant investment in vehicles and equipment. We bought six new ambulances and will have two fly cars ... and a physician supervising 24 hours a day, seven days a week," Ferrentino said Thursday. "We'll be ready to go by midnight Aug. 31. I'm excited."

If there are any citizen concerns about the switch from city ambulance to a private company, they needn't worry, she said. Not only will people "definitely get an ambulance when they need it," she said, but the community will "be pleasantly surprised at the service."

None of those individual contracts sent out to the city and surrounding towns, villages and fire districts have been returned as of Wednesday's mail. They were recently sent out, though, and each jurisdiction will need

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time to review the details, she said. Contracts do not have to be signed for an area to receive service, but the contracts offer a guarantee of Mercy Flight's standards, such as response times. Response times of five minutes up to about 15 have been estimated, depending on where the recipient lives.

"We will still provide service but we wouldn't be held to those standards," Ferrentino said. "But as an organization, we would hold ourselves to those standards. I've been with Mercy Flight since 1981 and have 32 years of EMS experience. I led the management team on this project ... delightfully so. There has been tremendous support from our management team. We're really looking forward to launching (Mercy EMS)."

The city isn't expected to be signing a contract per its labor agreement with the fire department, County Manager Jay Gsell said. The fire union has filed a grievance against the city for violating the Taylor Law, which states that a municipality cannot let employees go in favor of signing a work agreement with another provider. City Council President Charlie Mallow and City Manager Jason Molino have said they didn't expect to sign another agreement and don't feel the union has any legal ground because of that. Molino did not return a call for comment Thursday.

"It's pretty evident the city will not be executing an agreement," Gsell said. "All other municipalities and fire districts, or those who have existing agreements with the city have been sent contracts ... to consider signing to guarantee the goal response times put into the RFP."

Part of the request for proposal and operating certificate includes a periodic "fitness competency review" by the state, Gsell said. That assessment will be ongoing and will be done again in a final review when the two-year contract is up for renewal in 2011, he said. That should offer some insight into the service Mercy EMS will provide.

"They're going to be on their best behavior. But the proof will be in the pudding," he said. "These are not amateurs in any way, shape or form. The transition has been relatively smooth."

The company offered positions to 16 of the 17 medically trained city fire department employees who applied. Of those, 15 have accepted and one person declined an offer, Ferrentino said. They will complement a full base of 58 total employees made up of "a very impressive mix of folks" mostly from the Genesee County area, she said.

Two ambulances will be stationed at United Memorial Medical Center and two at the county airport, with another two used as back-up vehicles and for special events, such as auto racing at Genesee Fairgrounds. Orientation and special training, for issues such as blood borne pathogens and patient privacy, is to begin later this month, she said.

Give me Mercy details ...

Mercy Flight Inc. has a history that dates to way before the company formed, Chief Financial Officer Margaret Ferrentino says.

LaSalle Ambulance operated ground ambulance service in the 1970s throughout Western New York (city of Buffalo, Erie and Niagara counties) and was bought by Rural Metro in 1995. Mercy Flight Inc. founded an air ambulance service in 1981 and a few years later broke off from Rural Metro when it got not-for-profit status.

The city took over ambulance service in 1998 when the former Genesee Memorial and St. Jerome hospitals -- operating as Genesee Mercy Healthcare -- got out of the business. Earlier this year, City Council voted to eliminate city ambulance service as of Sept. 1.

Mercy Flight Inc. founded Mercy EMS this year to provide ground ambulance for Genesee County.



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What that should mean to local citizens is that many Mercy EMS staffers have "20 to 30 years of experience" in both ground and air ambulance emergency response and transports, Ferrentino said.

The company will bill the patient's insurance company, Medicare or Medicaid. For those people who are uninsured or underinsured, there's a sliding fee scale set-up. The patient will need to submit proof of income to be evaluated for a potential discount, she said.

Now that the ground company has been formed, it won't change the way donations are handled, she said. Any donations to Mercy Flight Inc. will go to help support air operations, "just the same as it has the past 27 years."

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