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## Ambulance corps back in action

Volunteer unit working to overcome difficulties

By Justin Mason (Contact)  
Gazette Reporter

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**DUANESBURG** When most people were settling in for the evening Thursday, Bill Grimm was racing down to the ambulance station on Cole Street.

The emergency tone went shortly after 6 p.m., when a woman in her 80s began having difficulty breathing. Grimm, a 63-year-old retired Niskayuna police officer, was at home rounding out the last of his six-hour shift with the Duanesburg Volunteer Ambulance Corps when he got the call – two hours and a trip to Ellis Hospital later, he returned home.

Like all of the company’s nearly three-dozen volunteers, Grimm regards his time as an ambulance driver for the non-profit company as being well worth any personal inconvenience. Also, volunteering a few hours with the company is far better than the alternative, which is no local ambulance service at all.

“A lot of people don’t realize there aren’t vast numbers of volunteers,” said Grimm, who also serves as DVAC’s president.

Internal strife and a lack of volunteers brought DVAC to the brink of insolvency just one year ago. But a strong core of dedicated volunteers has battled to bring Schenectady County’s only volunteer ambulance company back from near-dissolution.

Today, the company still struggles with filling its roster and occasionally has to rely on mutual aid companies when volunteers aren’t available. But things are better.

“There has been a complete turnaround,” Grimm said.

DVAC first began seeing problems around 2003, when about a dozen active members refused to answer calls. They cited the heavy-handed leadership of Capt. Bruce Smith as their main reason.

One former assistant crew chief claimed Smith had kicked him out of an ambulance they

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had ridden together to a call. Others refused to publicly discuss issues, fearing retribution.

The disgruntled members tried to oust Smith from his captaincy during corps elections, but were unsuccessful. The sudden appearance of more than two dozen absentee ballots helped re-elect him.

As a conciliation to the striking volunteers, the board of directors established a grievance committee they could use to challenge some of Smith's disciplinary authority. But the committee never materialized and DVAC's problems continued to fester – the results showed in the company's performance.

crisis point

"They saw the need for change, but they couldn't get it for a long period of time," said board Chairman Charles Leoni.

By January 2008, DVAC's active roster had only five emergency medical technicians. At one point, overall membership dipped to about a dozen volunteers; the sparse crew was able to fill only three of the 28 shifts needed to cover the town. The company began missing scores of calls.

Fearing the organization was on the verge of collapse, town officials decided to withhold their annual contribution, slightly less than a third of the company's annual budget.

Town Board members also directed the state police dispatchers in Princetown to divert all emergency calls away from DVAC if the company couldn't muster a crew in under three minutes. That made it virtually impossible for the company to respond to emergencies, thereby clipping its other primary revenue stream.

The allotted time was later extended to eight minutes, giving the volunteers a fighting chance to make calls. But the company continued to flounder.

The failures came to a head in May 2008, when in a surprise move, Leoni announced 13 members of the company would be deemed inactive and expelled. Among them were Smith, his wife, and a board member. All the expelled members were offered a chance to reapply but none did.

The expulsion prompted about two dozen volunteers to return. Town Board members also agreed to restore funding on a month-by-month basis throughout 2008.

Since that time, the board has revised the company's bylaws and reduced the number of elected positions. They did away with several officer titles, limiting the authority structure to a captain and assistant captain.

Leoni said the changes helped streamline DVAC's leadership, allowing the organization to run much smoother. The new bylaws also gave increased weight to the board in the decision-making.

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“Overall, it runs much smoother that way,” Leoni said.

Costs were also brought under control. Two of DVAC’s four ambulances were taken off the road, saving the company thousands of dollars in insurance premiums.

The company addressed its lack of EMTs by entering into personnel-sharing agreements with several local fire companies. DVAC ambulance drivers can now answer calls without an EMT on board, provided there is one from a local fire company at the scene.

“Everybody is willing to help everybody else in a time of need,” said Lorraine Cacciolfi, who was elected captain of the company in January.

still a challenge

Like many volunteer organizations, the company has had difficulties in finding new members. Many of the volunteers are unable to fill the company’s daytime shifts, meaning they’re sometimes scrambling to find a full crew.

They’ve also struggled with keeping volunteer hours manageable. Grimm said it’s not unusual for a volunteer to put in upward of 30 hours with DVAC, which is a lot for someone with a full-time job.

But the alternative isn’t something any of the volunteers want to consider. Without DVAC, Duanesburg would be solely reliant on agencies from nearby towns.

During the height of DVAC’s internal turmoil, ambulances were being dispatched from the Rotterdam Emergency Medical Services nearly 20 minutes away. The Greater Amsterdam Volunteer Ambulance Corps in Montgomery County and the Schenectady-based Mohawk Ambulance also helped on a mutual aid basis, along with ambulances based at volunteer fire companies in Burtonsville and Esperance.

Grimm said the outlying ambulances were a temporary solution during DVAC’s shake-up. But because of their distance from the town, response times for emergencies were greatly inflated.

He also doubted that a private company would have much interest in picking up DVAC’s territory, had the company folded. The company only answered 137 calls during their reorganization last year and is up to about 85 so far this year.

“I don’t think they could make a profit,” he said.

DVAC’s brush with insolvency jarred some community members into volunteering. Debbie Suito had never worked for an ambulance company before, but felt compelled to join DVAC when she learned of its problems last year.

“They needed members, so I joined,” she said with shrug. “If I’m helping the community, that’s what it’s all about.”

Pam Naze decided to join the company in October after learning of its membership woes

through her fiance, who also volunteers. With urging from DVAC's leadership, the former nurse's aide is receiving her EMT certification and is soon hoping to work with the company.

"This just helps the community," she said during a training session at the station. "If we don't step up to the plate, then who is going to be there when our neighbors need help?"

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