



## The Real Deal



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# Why ambulance rides are so expensive: The Real Deal

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Syracuse (WSYR-TV) - It's not pleasant to think about needing an ambulance but the fact is that if you need one the fee has skyrocketed during the last five years. And, depending on where you get sick in Central New York, the fees could be dramatically different.

John Monahan recently had a seizure. "[I] shut off the water, got ready to start drinking it and my legs gave way and I hit the floor and banged against the door bruising my back," he said.

Monahan's mother immediately called 911 and a WAVES Ambulance arrived within minutes. "At the time I didn't have insurance coverage, still unemployed, still looking for work," he said.

He didn't give it too much thought, until the bill arrived a few days later. "It was an emergency condition, it was not something that's normally done. I expected at least a few hundred dollars, similar to in the past, plus an increase for their costs," he said.

He was wrong. He owed a total of \$898, including a flat fee of \$800 just for the ambulance to show up, and then another \$14 per mile.

The Director of WAVES Ambulance, Al Kalfass, admits the prices for a transport have gone up twenty-five percent in the last five years but says that is because the cost of doing business has risen too. "We aren't looking to make anyone poor or afraid of calling an ambulance," he said.

Kalfass says new technology and reimbursement rates also contribute to the increase. Most insurance companies pay about \$550 for an advanced life support transport. Medicare pays \$395 for that same

ride, and Medicaid pays about \$215.

Also, ambulance services aren't allowed to say no. They have to respond when someone calls 911 whether it is a true emergency or not. When people call 911 for assistance with minor medical situations, they drive up the price of ambulance rides for everyone.

Kalfass says that in some cases, WAVES isn't even covering its costs, let alone making a profit. It seems that those with high deductibles or no insurance at all have to balance that out.

WAVES is one of the most expensive ambulance services in the in Central New York. While the average price is around \$675 for an advanced life support call, prices range from \$300 per ride to more than \$1,000 even though each offers very similar services.

What is the reason there is such a price difference depending on which ambulance company shows up at your door?

First and foremost, the size of the service is a big factor. The more paid paramedics they have on staff, the more they're going to have to charge patients. Even volunteer corps still have paid staff.

It also depends on how large their coverage area is and whether they have contracts with towns and villages that enable them to collect some money through a fee on resident's property tax bills. Those that have such a contract tend to be a little less expensive, though not dramatically so.

Lastly, the farther you live from a hospital, the more you're going to have to pay. In addition to paying for the extra mileage, the longer trips take ambulances out of service for a greater length of time and put more wear and tear on the vehicles. All those are factors that go into setting prices.

*What has been your experience with local ambulance companies? Share with us in our comments section.*

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