

## **What do ambulance squads have to do when they take a call?**

**By Debra J. Groom / The Post-Standard**

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For the specifics

A section of the state Health Department's Web site, **at this particular link**, lists regulations all ambulance squads in the state must follow. These include keeping the confidentiality of patient information and following do not resuscitate orders.

State law requires an ambulance to respond if called. But what are crew members obligated to do once they arrive on the scene?

The question surfaced last week as the state Health Department confirmed it is investigating the Oswego Fire Department ambulance squad on a complaint it failed to transport patients to the hospital on a handful of occasions.

Chris Bitner, a board member for the New York State Volunteer Ambulance and Rescue Association and executive director of NAVAC in North Syracuse, said each ambulance — whether paid or volunteer — is required to have a policy stating where the squad will transport patients.

He said most ambulance companies say they will take patients to the nearest hospital. If that hospital's emergency room is closed, the ambulance will go to the next closest hospital.

Ambulance squads list service areas in their operating certificates outlining what areas they cover. Pat Egan, Oswego County director of emergency management, said squads adhere to these boundaries except when there are extraordinary emergencies and they respond to another area for mutual aid.

Oswego Alderman Constance Cosemento said the Oswego ambulance responds to calls in the city, towns of Oswego and Scriba and the college.

Bitner also said "it is not appropriate to say" to a patient that the ambulance crew will not transport the patient. Even if the person has a minor or superficial injury, the ambulance still has to transport, he said.

He mentioned this is not true everywhere. In Pennsylvania, where he once worked, if a patient's problem is deemed minor by ambulance personnel, and a doctor agrees, the person

can to visit a doctor's office.

"But that is not acceptable in this system," he said.

Even people referred to as "frequent flyers" — ones who call the ambulance all the time for one reason or another — must be transported, Bitner said.

"These people tie up resources and don't pay bills. But we can't tell them we aren't going to transport them," he said.

But if an ambulance squad shows up to a house and is confronted by a violent situation, Bitner said the paramedics and emergency medical technicians first job is to keep themselves safe.

"Number one is keep yourself safe. Number one and a half is the patient," he said. "We will back off until its safe, until the police arrive. We can't help anyone if we get hurt."

If a patient requests transport to a specific hospital, an ambulance squad can oblige if the hospital is within their service area. Cosemento said in Oswego, the ambulance takes everyone to Oswego Hospital unless it is a matter Oswego Hospital isn't equipped to handle, such as a severe stroke or someone who needs dialysis.

Bitner also said hospitals throughout Central New York will transfer premature babies needing more care to Crouse Hospital's neonatal intensive care unit. Ambulances will transport the babies.

Jeffrey Hammond, speaking for the state health Department, would not say who filed the complaints against the Oswego ambulance or what the exact allegations are.

Susie Surprenant, executive director of the Central New York Regional Emergency Medical Services Council, said last week that all Continuous Quality Improvement reports or investigations are protected by privacy laws through the state Education Department.

Oswego Fire Chief Joseph Perry issued a written statement last week basically reiterating the need for confidentiality. Mayor Randolph Bateman said he is going to wait until the investigation is complete and he sees a copy of the findings before deciding what to do.

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