

# Fairport-East Rochester Post

## Ambulance corps adapt to changing times

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Perinton, N.Y. — Call it a sign of the times. As of Jan. 1, a ride in a Perinton ambulance will cost you. The Perinton Volunteer Ambulance Corps was among the last local providers not to bill for its services, but no more. Along with more than a dozen other volunteer agencies in Monroe County, the Perinton agency now bills a patient's health care provider after treatment.

Spurred by the increasing requirements to be a certified responder and a decline in the number of volunteers over the years, the agency was forced to bring its free rides to an end.

If a person can't afford treatment or an ambulance ride, however, they won't be turned away, assured Mike Dollard, Perinton Volunteer Ambulance Corps. The agency has always found a way to cover the costs of that treatment, and that will continue.

"There's been a big downturn in the capacity to volunteer because people are working and don't have as much time to spare," said Tim Czapranski, Monroe County's administrator of emergency medical services.

Volunteer ambulance corps are struggling to find volunteers to work during regular business hours. Jeff Hammond, Monroe County Department of Health says there has been a shift in the way volunteers work, as more gravitate toward evening and weekend shifts. Michael Mastrianni, president of the New York State Volunteer Ambulance and Rescue Association, attributes the decline to a struggling economy.

"Years ago, families could survive on one income. Now both parents are working, and high schoolers are looking for the summer," said Mastrianni, noting the drop in volunteerism has been dramatic over the last decade. "It's not just across the board," he said.

### Local impact

Perinton has a staff of 90 volunteers, including ambulance dispatchers and 65 Emergency Medical Technicians and Paramedics at the Turk Hill Road station, where three ambulance units, a two-person crew and one dispatcher are available at all times. The organization is funded by private donations and a contract with the Town of Perinton. In 2010, taxpayers paid 9 cents assessed value special district charge each year. That will drop to 8 cents in 2011, given the billing change.

Now that the ambulance corps is taking in revenue, volunteers will have the option of receiving a per-hour salary, a change from continuing to work for free.

The East Rochester Volunteer Ambulance Corps has a staff of 25 volunteers. That group started billing six years ago to the village board. Emergency responders there also have the option of receiving a salary, as in Perinton. Captain Terrence's payment option serves as an incentive for EMS staff, and also boosts volunteerism by reducing the strain on individuals.

volunteers, allowing them to take shorter shifts each month.

### **Changing times, changing pressures**

An ambulance ride can cost anywhere between \$300 and \$2,000, depending on a patient's needs. As the economic : more pressure on volunteer ambulance organizations across the state, billing for service has grown more widely acc

"It was difficult for many to start billing, because they felt it went against the very nature of being a volunteer organi Mastrianni. "Now it's become a matter of need."

That need is apparent nationwide. A study by the Government Accountability Office in 2007 showed that Medicare | approximately 6 percent lower than the cost of providing transportation for an ambulance patient. In rural areas, ap percent of the cost isn't covered by Medicare, the study reported.

For many area agencies, including those in Brighton, Greece and Pittsford, charging for immediate treatment and ri hospital is nothing new. They've been billing patrons for years. But just because an agency bills, that doesn't mean tl are paid, noted Mike Cumbie of the Hamlin Volunteer Ambulance Corps.

In Hamlin, a team of 20 volunteers works around the clock to ensure all 911 calls are answered. The agency is still cc volunteers. The money generated by billing, however, pays for workers compensation (including volunteers), medic ambulance vehicles and building maintenance.

"The bill is just to keep the doors open," Cumbie said.

Not all agencies have that option. Ambulances affiliated with volunteer fire departments, such as Sea Breeze and Po not permitted by the state to bill for their services, because they receive all their funding from tax dollars. Those tax paid positions in those departments.

Commercial agencies are also part of the picture: Rural/Metro and Monroe Ambulance — the two largest commerci Rochester area — are fully staffed by paid EMS workers, who respond to 911 calls and provide mutual aid to private that contract with them.

### **Increased requirements**

The ever-changing requirements to be a certified medical responder are another factor in declining volunteerism, sa Perinton.

LaShay Harris is a registered paramedic who started working as a volunteer at the Irondequoit Volunteer Ambulanc state requirements place pressure on EMTs and paramedics, who must be re-certified every three years.

"Requirements for paramedics have increased, so it's basically a full-time job," said Harris, who now works at the Ir and at Rural/Metro Medical Services in Rochester.

Re-certification can be done through a one-semester class followed by a written exam or continued education. This | introduced in 2001, requires certified EMS workers to show proof of at least 72 hours of refresher training, CPR and certification, verification of skill maintenance, and additional proof of continued education.

Although specific requirements vary for EMTs and paramedics, many EMTs don't renew their certifications within t years of working, said Dollard. That, and the difficult nature of the work itself, are reasons some don't continue to v

### **Awareness is key**

Others say the problem may be a lack of awareness among people who don't know how to help, says Cumbie, direct

at the Hamlin Volunteer Ambulance Corps. While the economy and extensive requirements are valid causes for decline, the real problem is lack of awareness among community members who don't know how to get involved, he said.

"You don't have to be an EMT to volunteer," said Cumbie.

At Hamlin, for example, anyone can apply to receive training to become an ambulance driver and have the cost of that training covered by the state Department of Health.

Undoubtedly, the average workday for anyone working as an EMS responder is strenuous. While many struggle with emotional fatigue, Cumbie said the payoff for this line of work is always rewarding.

"It requires someone who can stay calm and focused in the midst of a problem and address it," said Cumbie. "There's a great satisfaction in helping someone who needs you at the worst moment in their life."

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