

Local news

Fire Protection - 1990-1995 Firefighters form united front

They hope new JPA will cut paramedic response time

By DAN WHITE
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SANTA CRUZ — When you're choking or having a heart attack and help comes along, it might not always be the help you need.

Fire trucks usually get to the scene before ambulances. The trucks have emergency medical technicians, but not the higher skilled paramedics needed for dire medical emergencies. Paramedics arrive in ambulances up to 15 minutes later.

Now, firefighters are trying to figure out ways to reduce the time between emergency phone calls and paramedics getting to the scene. In July, the area's 12 fire companies formed a joint powers authority to help put paramedics on fire trucks.

"The JPA will be a kind of clearinghouse," said JPA board president Sam Robustelli, Boulder Creek fire chief. "If Boulder Creek wants paramedics, the JPA can help."

This may be the first fire authority in state history. Santa Cruz Fire Chief Ron Prince described it as a model JPA that is designed to complement the contracted ambulance service, not compete with it.

The county's current ambulance contractor, American Medical Response West, has six ambulances and 35 full-time employees — 10 people on any given day. These resources can run be spread thin or even run out during crunch times, especially on busy weekends or after big, multi-victim accidents, firefighters say.

"I'm thinking of the bigger picture, the earthquake, the downed aircraft, the escaped poisonous gas, the chlorine spill," Central Fire District Assistant Chief Jerry Bowles said. "You can't have enough paramedics in those cases. ... During the (Loma Prieta) earthquake, we ran out of ambulances. ... It would have been nice to have a higher level of care available to us."

A fire-fighting EMT can do advanced first aid, open up a breathing passage, administer oxygen and use a heart-start, but sometimes it's not enough. In the most serious cases, firefighters can't do much for the victim and end up waiting for the ambulance, Robustelli said. If fire trucks had paramedics, "we could start IVs, administering drugs, ... all the things we can't do now. All we can do now is stand there and say, 'Gee, I hope they get there soon.'"

Paramedics have more advanced skills and equipment, including an electrocardiogram monitor that delivers information back to the hospital, allowing a doctor to give instructions.

Firefighters also worry about lag times. Although fire stations are scattered throughout the county, ambulances respond from just four stations — one key reason why fire trucks usually get to the scene first. The JPA could share the cost of a joint response system involving an ambulance contractor, according to Richard Lazar, a contractor who drafted the JPA agreement.

JPA supporters believe engine-based paramedics could improve medical response and care. But mostly, the JPA is about unity, said Aptos/La Selva fire Chief

Phil Scofield. For the first time ever, all 12 departments will approach the county as one voice. Santa Cruz County does not want to have a fragmented emergency response, he said.

The JPA may add clout to the stations that want paramedics, but it also puts a new burden on them. JPA members will be accountable to each other. Decisions regarding paramedics will be handled by a group. Each department gets one vote regardless of size.

Still in its infancy, the JPA hasn't taken any significant actions yet. It includes the Aptos/La Selva, Ben Lomond, Boulder Creek, Branciforte, Central, Felton, Pajaro Valley, Santa Cruz, Scotts Valley, Watsonville

paramedics. None are proposing transport — yet.

Boulder Creek, Ben Lomond and Aptos fire companies own ambulances that are used as safety nets if AMR ambulances run out during an emergency.

"That is not to say sometime in the future those agencies couldn't negotiate with AMR," Prince said. "But I don't think the focal point of the JPA is the transport business."

Last year, Central Fire District — which covers Capitola, Live Oak and Soquel — made an unsuccessful bid to put paramedics on its trucks. Some of the Central administration was considering transport too.

At the time, the county Emergency Medical Services program expressed concern that too many para-

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and Zayante fire departments.

Don Hiatt, county Emergency Medical Services program manager, said the JPA will have to do its own policing. "Instead of the county being the bad guy, saying this costs too much money, the JPA will have to do its own soul-searching."

The idea of putting paramedics on fire trucks is far from new. Back in 1979, Aptos/La Selva department put paramedics on trucks several years before the county set up an exclusive ambulance contract system.

Hiatt said the county has no policy against paramedics on fire trucks, although it prefers them to be part of an integrated plan that includes the whole county and avoids overlap and inconsistency. "We mostly want to minimize redundancy," he said. He is concerned about the idea of fire companies transporting victims from the scene, serving as de facto ambulance companies and competing with a contractor.

Several fire companies, including Central, Santa Cruz, Watsonville and Scotts Valley, are considering

medics and not enough advanced life support calls could lead to less seasoned paramedics.

Hiatt said the county told the department to come back after the JPA had been formed.

But Central was disappointed and will make another proposal to the county this year — for engine-based paramedics, not transport. Jeff Dorrell, Central firefighters' union representative, said five trained paramedics can't be being used yet. "We don't want them to stagnate." Within the year, Central will have two more paramedics trained.

Bill Simpkins, who was on the Central board of directors last year, said Central could get faster, cheaper service than it has now, and that ride fees could go straight back to the firefighters.

But he voiced support for the JPA idea. "Any time departments work together is great," Simpkins said. "They ought to have a single department for the entire county. But the JPA, I guess, is the next best thing. If they can pull it off, more power to them."