

Aptos paramedics won't be using their own ambulances any more

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Patients will no longer be transported to hospitals in paramedic ambulances under a pilot program of the Aptos/La Selva Fire District.

Starting Aug. 15, paramedics will ride on fire engines to call locations, but the patients will be transported by the countywide ambulance company, Ambulance Medical Response West.

The change takes away the ability of paramedics to transport critically injured patients, but it will free them up to respond to more calls overall, said Chief Chuck Mornard.

"We'll lose our capability in traumatic-type incidents," he said. But the last time a paramedic had to transport a critically injured patient was three years ago, he added.

In addition, because the district had been preparing for cutbacks

this year and because this spring the county renewed a four-year contract with AMR West, "it seemed like a good move," Mornard said. The change will save about \$40,000 in the district's \$3.7 million budget.

Paramedics in ambulances were usually the first to arrive in the Aptos/La Selva district, Mornard said. They would treat the patient until the ambulance service arrived, then ride along with the patient in the county ambulance, with the fire department's ambulance following behind. This method could tie up a paramedic for one to two hours, Mornard said.

"Now, we'll pass off to the ambulance service, enabling our paramedics to respond to more calls," he said. Last year, he estimates that paramedics had to go out of the district about 400 times. On occasion, the district would get

a second call when the paramedic was "out of position."

"Under the new system, the chances of that happening are remote," he said.

One of the district's nine paramedics will now be working out of Station 2 in Rio Del Mar, with a second at Station 1 near Cabrillo College. About 92 percent of response times last year were under six minutes. This shouldn't change, said Mornard, adding that response times may actually improve for Rio Del Mar residents.

Mornard said he hoped AMR West would respond as quickly. Currently, two county ambulances are stationed in Watsonville, one in Santa Cruz, one in Capitola, and one in Ben Lomond. Mornard said he had anticipated that one would be moved from Watsonville to Aptos, but this didn't happen.

"Other types of calls we can sta-
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bilize, but on those critical incidents where the patient has to be transported immediately, those are the ones we are concerned about," he said. "We're hoping that our analysis will be true and it shouldn't hinder the level of service at all."

The County Health Service plans to examine response times six months after the system starts to see if there are any delays, he said. At that point, the fire district will decide whether to make the change permanent.

The Salinas and Fremont fire departments operate an engine-based paramedic system, but it is the first time it has been tried in Santa Cruz County, Mornard said.

"We've taken a lot of time planning, brainstorming and troubleshooting, to make sure the day it goes in, it's as flawless as possible," Mornard said.

The district will keep the two ambulances for use during disasters.