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## EMS in critical condition

Volunteer shortage hits rural areas

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As Brenda Wood was driving home after undergoing radiation treatment for breast cancer, her pager rang. Someone had called 911, so Wood, a Rensselaerville Volunteer Ambulance Service EMT, answered the emergency call, because if she didn't, who would?

"It's kind of pathetic that we had to rely on her that bad, but that's how it works," said her son Brian, the Albany County Sheriff's Department EMS unit coordinator.

Amid the wildflowers, gray wooden barns and silver silos in pastoral Albany County, among the wild turkeys and deer that meander across paved and dirt roads, a sign outside the Helderberg Ambulance station in Berne reads, "Help Wanted!"

The sign holds figurative and literal meaning. A shortage of EMS volunteers -- the backbone of many rural communities such as Albany County's hill towns -- exists. It's become harder to attract them, and not just in Albany County.

"It has never been this difficult to recruit," said Phil Mulleedy, program director for the Adirondack/Appalachian Regional EMS Council, which relies exclusively on volunteers to staff 107 of its 115 EMS agencies. The council oversees Delaware, Fulton, Hamilton, Montgomery, Otsego and Schoharie counties.

"It has become increasingly apparent that we just don't have the people that we really need to do the job comfortably well," Mulleedy said.

It's a concern echoing throughout the country.

"It's not that there aren't enough people trained or qualified," said Gregg Margolis, associate director of the National Registry of Emergency Medical Technicians, in Columbus, Ohio. "It's that they for whatever reason don't appear to be volunteering or working."

No relief

Increased time constraints, commuting distances and state requirements have drained the pool of volunteer candidates, EMS officials say.

More people work more hours, in part because of the increase in two-income families.

Fewer people work close to home, where employers could permit them to punch out and commit as many as three hours to answer an emergency call. Making the shortage in volunteers more acute: the majority of emergency calls are made in the daytime (the Albany County Sheriff's Department EMS unit receives 73 percent of its calls between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m.), when many people are working or commuting.

Prospective EMT-Basics must complete the 135.5-hour state EMS curriculum and pass practical skills and written certification exams (the curriculum in effect until 1998 required 110 hours). Additionally, every three years EMS workers must complete a 72-hour continuing education recertification program or a

59.5-hour challenge refresher course; the latter requires passing practical and written exams.

"It's not just people saying we don't want to volunteer anymore," Brian Wood said. "The demands keep on increasing."

Volunteer shortages can cause emergency response times to rise, as fewer people handle more calls. The shortages also raise questions about the future of the EMS-volunteer work force.

"When you lose those people who do the majority of the calls, is there going to be somebody else to pick up the slack (going) forward?" Brian Wood said.

To help, Albany County created the Recruitment Task Force, a recruitment and retention committee. Volunteers are reimbursed for class fees and transportation costs. They can earn points redeemable for money to buy job equipment. Volunteer EMS and fire agencies also participate in the New York State Length of Service Award Program, which provides a monetary award, for each year of active service, collectible when the volunteer reaches retirement age.

"Everybody tries whatever they can do," said Brian Wood, "but the bottom line is when it comes time to do it people will say, 'Big deal. ... Who cares if I get \$500 a month when I'm 65? I'm only 30 now.' "

The Adirondack/Appalachian Regional EMS Council reimburses volunteers for class and transportation costs.

A recently passed state law that takes effect Jan. 17 will give EMS and fire department volunteers the opportunity to participate in health insurance plans offered by their local municipalities by paying the group rate.

But it's not enough.

"Since Sept. 11, 2001," Mulleedy said, "I have observed and read this repeatedly: Emergency Medical Services is held in the highest regard.

"But not that many people want to join the ranks," he said.

The Albany County Sheriff's Department EMS Unit, in Voorheesville, employs 73 paid EMS workers, including 46 paramedics, to serve Rensselaerville, Berne, Westerlo, New Scotland, Coeymans and Bethlehem -- a 305.8-square-mile area in which cellphone reception can be spotty, moonlight often substitutes for streetlight, and as many as 35 minutes may pass before help arrives.

"The Albany-Colonie area and in the cities, they expect you to get there within (a few) minutes," said Rick Parker, a paid paramedic who occasionally works in Albany County Hilltowns. "Here, (the locals) thank you when you're there within a half hour. They thank you for coming."

Recruits hard to attract

In the six-county Adirondack/Appalachian region (which includes sparsely populated Hamilton County, an area of 1,720 square miles that's nearly the size of the state of Delaware), between September 1996 and January 2001 the number of EMS volunteers decreased 31 percent, and then leveled off. Retention rates are high, officials say, but new recruits are hard to attract, which is why some officials envision a day when EMS volunteers will be replaced with fully paid staffs, at taxpayers' expense.

"If things continue as they are as far as recruitment and retention," Mulleedy said, "there's no question that day is coming."

"The writing is on the wall now," said Tim Mirabile, executive director of Regional Emergency Medical

Organization, which operates EMS in Albany, Columbia, Greene, Rensselaer, Saratoga, and Schenectady counties. "You see many squads now going to pay crews, especially in the daytime hours."

Margolis said low-population-density communities will continue to rely on volunteers for the foreseeable future, because "you would literally have to fundamentally restructure the way EMS in this country is financed and paid for. Not only would it be more expensive, the way you'd go about funding of the system would have to change pretty dramatically."

"Volunteerism is a wonderful social activity that increases the strength and the fiber of our communities," Margolis said. "It would be a bad thing if volunteerism in EMS and in all walks of American life went away."

At Rensselaerville Volunteer Ambulance Service, no volunteers are scheduled to work Thursdays, Sundays and in the daytime on Fridays and Saturdays. The hope is that a volunteer will field an emergency call if necessary, though no one is scheduled to.

"Someone usually steps up to the plate," said 59-year-old Brenda Wood, whose cancer is in remission.

In Rensselaerville, she's often that "someone."

"It's a small town, I love (its people) and I'd do almost anything for them," she said. "But I almost think they thought (when I was treated for cancer), Whew, she can still do calls."

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