Fewer volunteers means more trouble for sagging EMS units
by JD Malone
Saturday June 16, 2007, 6:05 PM

At 7 p.m. on a quiet Monday night, the radio on volunteer Karen Smith's hip squawked, a call came through for emergency services and Smith, with fellow volunteer Don Burslem on her heels, hopped into an ambulance, sparked its lights and sped away.

For more than four decades an all-volunteer force has manned Bushkill Township's ambulance service, but those days are coming to a close.

According to the department's officials, the volunteers chose to add four paid emergency medical technicians to cover weekday, 5 a.m. to 5 p.m. shifts.

Smith, a volunteer and the ambulance captain, said the department missed 172 calls during the day last year because of a lack of volunteers.

"The reality is the township is growing by leaps and bounds," Smith said. "And we need to be able to provide for the residents."

Smith said volunteers cover nights and weekends without a hitch, but people able to pull a daytime shift without pay are all but gone.

When basic-life-support calls come in that Bushkill's volunteer force can't answer, Nazareth Ambulance Corps or other service providers from as far as Bethlehem Township pick up the slack.

And it follows that the further a squad must go for a call, the longer it takes to get there.

"If we had paid people they'd be waiting in the station and they'd be in transit in two minutes," said 35-year Bushkill EMT Warren Rohn. "It can save lives."

Rohn said members resisted hiring paid EMTs, but in the end realized that providing a vital service is more important than preserving history.

Tim Sullivan, assistant ambulance captain and a 25-year volunteer with the Hecktown Volunteer Ambulance Corps, said Hecktown formed a cooperative with ambulance services in Bath, East Allen Township and Hanover Township in 1999 to cover daytime shifts with paid EMTs.

"Our residents weren't getting the service they needed," Sullivan said. "We did that to ensure residents were covered.

"The general public doesn't realize what's happening."

Where did all the volunteers go?

In the 1970s and 80s Bushkill's volunteer ranks bulged with close to 150 members. Today membership is a steady 50 to 60.

The Nazareth Ambulance Corps dropped "volunteer" from its name a few months ago. Director Conrad Bowers said the staff there is now 98 percent paid, but at one time was an all-volunteer outfit.

Bowers said as time crept on and life in the Valley changed with factories closing and workers commuting longer and longer distances, the pool of available volunteers dried up.

"Times change. It's not what it used to be," Sullivan said. "I sure hope (volunteering) doesn't go away. The
backbone of EMS is volunteers."

When Nazareth won the contract to provide service to Gracedale retirement home, the department needed more daytime help than was available through its volunteers. "It became awful difficult to have people get time off of work," Bowers said.

Rohn believes the Klecknersville Rangers might be the last all-volunteer squad left in Northampton County.

Last year the Rangers were stung by questions from the Moore Township supervisors about the squad's ability to cover daytime calls. At the time, Fire Chief Ernest Hoch said volunteer organizations have trouble getting members to respond for daytime calls.

"Everyone has the same problem," Bowers said of a lack of volunteers during the day.

"Volunteers just aren't around," Rohn said. "Not too many people want to get up from a hot meal or out of bed at 2 a.m."

Sullivan said people don't have as much free time as they used to and new residents from larger, more urban areas don't understand that in many cases the people protecting them are volunteers.

"It's a dying breed," Sullivan said. "There is no interest from the community anymore. It is heartbreaking and frustrating."

More than volunteers lacking, money tight too.

Adding two paid crews means Bushkill won't miss nearly as many as the 172 calls they missed last year. But the $300 fee per call won't come close to covering the cost to pay the crews. "We're going to lose money," Smith said.

Eileen Rohn, Warren's wife and fellow EMT, said the department would be thrilled to break even. Money concerns run deep at ambulance and fire departments across the region. And stories of insolvency and embezzlement have rocked local services. Forks Township Emergency Squad reopened in April after an eight-month shutdown to sort through a financial mess left by a former director who is charged with misappropriating $21,000.

Eileen Rohn said departments need to maintain checks and balances. She said busy volunteers drive the trucks, cook breakfasts, set up for bingo, sign checks, fight fires, and even take out the trash, but that's no excuse for allowing finances to spiral out of control.

Bowers said money is tight in the small, local operations and he wouldn't be surprised to see considerable consolidation, especially among the volunteer services, over the next few years. Sullivan agreed. He thinks ambulance service is more and more about money as for-profit or at least all-paid outfits replace volunteer services.

"I think as a whole you'll see regionalization," Sullivan said. "In the end the residents will lose out because they are waiting for patient care."

Bushkill's books are sound thanks to solid subscription efforts and fund raising despite a common misconception that most ambulance and fire services in the area are funded by municipal taxes, according to Allen Smith. Smith is Karen Smith's husband and president of the Bushkill Volunteer Fire Co. which oversees the EMS squad.

To make ends meet, Bushkill hosts an annual carnival, runs bingo on Wednesdays and offers a huge breakfast every Sunday.
“The people (moving in), they expect it. They dial 9-1-1 and the ambulance will come,” Sullivan said. “They don’t realize how much of their service is supplied by volunteers.”

Bowers welcomed any legislation in Harrisburg that would direct a few more dollars to EMS service providers.

Dale Butz, Bushkill’s first lieutenant, said the decision to add paid staff never came down to money. He and Rohn, both retired bakers, said what mattered most was improving service. They’re willing to pay, but too few applied.

When Bushkill’s daytime service will come on line isn’t clear. The department’s initial dip into recruiting EMTs yielded just two applicants for four openings.

Smith said she was discouraged by the turnout, but is holding out hope that a stronger effort will pull in a few more applications.

Butz said it’s a tough job and not for the faint of heart. According to Sullivan and Burslem it is the personal satisfaction of serving the community that keeps them around.

"We’ve had people become EMT’s, go on one call and never come back,” Butz said.

Butz and Rohn hope the new focus and extended service reinvigorates the department in a more and more difficult environment.

"You don't know if the boat's going to sink until you put it in the water," Butz said.