Ambulance corps in Cornwall faces uncertain times

By Michael Randall
Times Herald-Record
December 28, 2009 2:00 AM

CORNWALL — A quest for independence and a state probe are making this a time of change and uncertainty at the Cornwall Volunteer Ambulance Corps.

The corps is negotiating with the town to become an independent entity, rather than one dependent on town tax dollars. The change would allow it to bill insurance companies for services, something the corps has been seeking for a couple of years.

The corps and the New Windsor Volunteer Ambulance Corps are the focus of a state Health Department investigation into, among other things, whether New Windsor is being properly dispatched to assist on more serious medical calls in Cornwall.

State Health Department spokeswoman Claire Pospicil would not comment on the investigation, which began Oct. 1.

Last month, three officers in the Cornwall corps, including longtime President and Chief Executive Officer Karen Zuzek, resigned their posts. They stepped down because of concerns about how the corps was dealing with the probe and, in at least one case, how much the corps was spending on legal advice in negotiations with the town.

New Windsor has paramedics and can handle more serious health emergencies, known as advanced life-support calls, while Cornwall is certified only for basic life-support calls.

But Gayle Metzger, president and chief executive officer of Mobile Life Support Services, said it has a state permit to answer calls in Cornwall, while New Windsor doesn't, and should be called first for ALS calls there. But she said that doesn't always happen.

"We were concerned because they weren't following the rules," Metzger said.

It's not a concern over lost revenue, she said. The number of calls Mobile Life answers in Cornwall — 29 in October, 47 in November — are a small percentage of the thousands of calls the private ambulance company answers across Orange County each year.

Michael Bigg, who just stepped down as Cornwall's chief to take over Zuzek's post, is also chief of the New Windsor corps. Neither he nor Brad Pinsky, the lawyer hired by the Cornwall corps to negotiate with the town, could be reached for comment.

The Cornwall corps hoped to wrap up talks with the town before the end of the year. But town Supervisor Kevin Quigley said the Town Board needs more time to mull the change.

Quigley said among the outstanding issues are a corps request for the town to continue to provide some funding in the early stages of the corps' independence. The town collected about $148,000 in tax revenue for the corps in the last year, he said.

mrandall@th-record.com