NWVAC Chief: Patients in Mind

Meghan Fitzpatrick

Local ambulance service providers Mobile Life Support Services, New Windsor Volunteer Ambulance Corps (NWVAC) and Cornwall Volunteer Ambulance Corps are caught up in a jurisdictional dispute.

In November, NWVAC Chief Michael Bigg received a letter from the New York State Department of Health's regional office that ordered his agency to “cease and desist” from responding to emergencies outside the Town of New Windsor. The state department's Bureau of Emergency Medical Services had received complaints about NWVAC responding to calls outside the town.

County and town officials received copies of the letter, as well as Mobile Life Support Services (MLSS). Gayle Metzger, president and CEO of MLSS, said “some” of the complaints came from her organization, a privately owned ambulance service provider based on Dickson Street in the City of Newburgh.

A few weeks later on December 2nd, Bigg received another letter stating the earlier one was “mischaracterized as a ‘cease and desist’ order” and was merely meant to inform NWVAC that it was being investigated for servicing territories outside the town.

Though Bigg's requests for copies of the complaints through the Freedom of Information Law were denied, he was able to narrow down which calls were for based on dates and times that were provided. All but one was in Cornwall, which has its own volunteer ambulance corps (COVAC), though it is not an advanced life support (ALS) provider like NWVAC or MLSS. Bigg says that on those occasions, NWVAC was not in violation, citing reasons that comply with state policy, such as the agency was specifically requested.

On December 3rd an Orange County Surrogate Court judge upheld that NWVAC should not cease and desist.

As of January 1, 2010, NWVAC will mark its first anniversary as an ALS provider. New Windsor's paramedics are qualified to basically bring the
emergency room to a person who is experiencing a more serious medical emergency. COVAC is limited to the care it can give because it is a basic life support provider. When a more serious medical emergency occurs in Cornwall, Mobile Life Support Services is called in as it has a countywide Certificate of Need and can be dispatched to medical emergencies anywhere in Orange County. But what happens when MLSS cannot respond?

According to the State Department of Health an ambulance service shall operate only within its authorized territory. But there are exceptions. The department's mutual aid policy requires that EMS agencies seeking assistance from an ALS provider call on "the closest (usually means the unit with the shortest response time to the patient) available."

Metzger did not want to speak on the matter because of the Bureau of Emergency Medical Services' ongoing investigation, but regarding the calls that MLSS submitted complaints for, she says, "We were close if not closer." She added, "We have absolutely no problem turning over a call."

Bigg, who was recently named president of COVAC after Karen Zuzek resigned last month, explained that according to the rules, when MLSS is not available the next ALS provider with a Certificate of Need is called in and that would be a commercial ambulance service based in Fishkill, NY. Rather than wait for paramedics to arrive from Dutchess County, COVAC follows the state's mutual aid policy.

COVAC Chief John Boyle says, "We request them [NWVAC] when Mobile Life is not available." Though when MLSS is available Boyle says he has been less than impressed with their response time on occasions.

According to Bigg, NWVAC had an average response time of 4 minutes 21 seconds to Cornwall emergencies between the months of June and November and has not missed a single call this year. Geography favors NWVAC and the people it serves in Cornwall as well. NWVAC's paramedics just have to drive over the border. MLSS has to drive from the City of Newburgh through the Town of New Windsor to get to a patient in Cornwall.

Metzger does not believe an average response time is truly accurate, but said Mobile Life's responses to the Cornwall area are "extremely rapid". She says her company's multiple ambulances allow them to be in more than one place at a time too.

In the past year, approximately 7 percent of NWVAC's calls were in the Town of Cornwall. The agency also provided mutual aid to Blooming Grove, Town of Newburgh and other municipalities.

"If we were dispatched, we're going to go," Bigg says. "COVAC is the primary ambulance. We're just helping. We're doing what is best for the patient."