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Hospital to use copters from upstate

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VALHALLA - Westchester Medical Center is losing its STAT Flight helicopter in a cost-cutting move that will shift patient air transports to upstate medical evacuation choppers - raising concerns among some local officials.

Life Net of New York, which operates the STAT Flight system, says the change will put medevac choppers closer to patients in outlying areas - and not at the Valhalla hospital where they are ultimately being dropped off.

"One of the things that has changed over the years is a general understanding that it makes more sense to have the aircraft where the patients' need is than at the facility where the patient needs to get to," said Craig Yale, a vice president at Air Methods Corp, Life Net's parent company.

"Almost by definition, if you're based at the receiving hospital you're as far away from the patient as you possibly can be," he said.

Yale said that starting on Aug. 3 STAT Flight helicopters stationed in Walkill, about 62 miles north of the hospital, and in Harris, about 86 miles north, will replace the local helicopter.

He said medevac choppers in Hartford, Conn., and New Jersey could also be called upon. Patients within a 25-mile radius of the hospital would get there faster by ambulance anyway, Yale maintained.

The change did raise concerns among a handful of local emergency services officials.

"We all know that - that we don't call for helicopters when you can make the land transport in as short a period of time," said Greenburgh Police Chief John Kapica.

"My concern is more with really bad situations where the patient is critical and you can't get an ambulance in or out."

Rockland County Emergency Services Coordinator Gordon Wren Jr. said STAT Flight choppers save lives, and said relying on upstate service could add at least five minutes to response time.

"It's a valuable resource," Wren said. "EMS people talk about the 'golden hour' - the short window needed for a patient getting care to live or not."

But others in Rockland, Putnam and Westchester said removing the chopper would have minimal impact on emergency services.

"Obviously, it's a cost-cutting measure and we understand that," said Adam Stiebeling, spokesman for the Putnam Department of Emergency Services. "But we don't feel that it's going to cause any inconvenience or any delay beyond normal circumstances."
Deputy Westchester County Executive Susan Tolchin said the move "is not going to impact public health or safety."

Kara Bennorth, spokeswoman for the medical center, said the move will not change the number of patients transported there by Colorado-based Air Methods.

"Their efforts to address excess capacity at all of their air bases will not change the number of STAT Flight transports to WMC, where patients are transported from, or the established protocols for transporting patients by air," she said. "The geography of the region is such that in some cases, the Walkill base will be closer to the patient."

Yale, of Air Methods, said the Westchester chopper made more than 40 flights a month in past years, but "now is in the low 20s to high teens."

Rockland neurosurgeon Dr. Jeffrey Oppenheim of Montebello agreed that "people hearing this will think this is a terrible thing." But he added that he's "not a big fan of STAT Flights."

"I wouldn't be too upset about this," he said. "This doesn't portend bad things for our county. I don't think this will create a health emergency."

Steve Kaye, captain with Spring Hill Ambulance Corps, Rockland's busiest, conceded that "it's very glamorous to have a helicopter." "It's exciting to see them land," Kaye said yesterday. "But we can do without them. We're in driving distance of Westchester Medical, if necessary."