MONTGOMERY — A billing problem that hasn't been resolved by town officials is putting seniors at risk of paying for trips to the hospital.

Since 2007, former Walden trustee Mary Ellen Matise has researched and questioned why the town won't bill Medicare for ambulance rides. The policy means some seniors have already received big bills that could be paid for by Medicare.

When Matise served on the Walden board, she had the town and village attorney draft language for the new ambulance corps contract. That contract was renewed last month without any mention of the issue.

In general, service from the taxpayer-supported Town of Montgomery Volunteer Ambulance Corps is free. However, in certain emergencies a Mobile Life paramedic must hop onboard the town vehicle. When that happens, the patient receives a bill.

Becky Pearson of Walden received one of those bills for more than $600 when her father, Sam Phelps Jr., was transported to the hospital.

"We once had a rule that if Mobile Life was there, you would turn the call over (to it) to help people to avoid the bill," said Mike McNamee, who served with the ambulance team for six years. McNamee recently took a leave from volunteering to focus on his new job as a Middletown firefighter.
McNamee said the volunteer corps is in need of both money and volunteers. The town budgeted $110,000 for 2011, which is the corps' only funding. McNamee said the ambulance corps did briefly bill Medicare but was told by the town supervisor to stop.

In other Orange County towns, Mobile Life sends a bill to the town ambulance service, which bills Medicare and gives a cut to Mobile Life, McNamee said. McNamee is also a former Mobile Life employee.

Supervisor Mike Hayes said the contract needed to be finished to authorize the purchase of a much-needed new ambulance. The billing issue is not currently a priority, Hayes said, but could be revisited. Hayes questioned whether the town should bill insurers at all, because the ambulance corps is taxpayer-funded.

Matise will present the board with a petition from seniors who want the problem resolved. Matise is frustrated that it's taken three years to address a known issue.

"The way it is now, it's hurting the seniors," Matise said.

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