Backup ambulances stir argument in Lancaster

By Stephen T. Watson

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6 Comments

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Six months after engaging in contentious contract negotiations with the Town of Lancaster, the Lancaster Volunteer Ambulance Corps is back sparring over provisions of the pact.

The disagreement centers on which outside ambulance corps should respond to emergency calls in the town at times when the volunteer corps doesn’t have an available ambulance.

The issue flared up at Monday’s Town Board meeting when Lancaster’s town attorney and a lawyer representing the volunteer ambulance corps engaged in a heated public argument.
“His comments were frivolous and spurious and out of line,” Town Attorney John M. Dudziak, said in an interview Tuesday, referring to the accusations from corps lawyer Bradley M. Pinsky.

The volunteer corps’ contract with the town assigns Rural/Metro Medical Services as the backup ambulance service in Lancaster, but members of the volunteer corps want Twin City Ambulance to take that position.

While town officials say the dispute hasn’t affected emergency services in Lancaster, a woman did wait 20 minutes for an ambulance to arrive after calling for help on July 13.

Dudziak called in corps representatives for a closed-door meeting Monday night to discuss that incident.

“My God, the first time we miss a call, they jump on us,” Pinsky said in an interview.

The town and the Lancaster Volunteer Ambulance Corps in late 2010 and early this year spent four months negotiating a renewed emergency-services agreement.

Rural/Metro had asked the town to give other agencies the chance to bid on the contract, a request that was not greeted enthusiastically by the corps.

The town had paid $45,000 per year to the corps but ended those payments as part of the contract settlement that was reached in February and runs through Dec. 31.

Corps members want Twin City to serve in the backup role, in part because of the tensions that developed between the two agencies during the contract dispute, but the town hasn’t budged.

The backup agency question came to a head at 1:45 p.m. July 13, when a Grambo Drive resident made an emergency call complaining of shortness of breath, according to a letter sent by Dudziak to Pinsky.

A corps staffer said the corps didn’t have an available ambulance and “repeatedly instructed” a town emergency dispatcher to call Twin City, Dudziak wrote.

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The dispatcher called Twin City at 1:49 p.m.

Another corps member responded to the Grambo Drive call in his personal vehicle at 2:01 p.m., and a Twin City ambulance finally arrived at 2:05 p.m.

Dudziak noted in his letter that either of two nearby Rural/Metro ambulances could have responded sooner than the corps or Twin City.

“A resident waited 20 minutes for an ambulance when we were eight minutes up the road,” Adin J. Bradley, division general manager of Western New York operations for Rural/Metro, said in an interview.

Pinsky said the corps, which has six ambulances, hadn’t missed any emergency calls this year until the July 13 call, when five ambulances were on the road, and the sixth was undergoing repairs.
The volunteer corps’ mutual-aid plan for the town would see a Twin City ambulance moved to corps headquarters whenever the corps is down to one crew, Pinsky said, assuring a backup ambulance would be in place.

“What could be better than a 100-percent guarantee?” he said, adding he doesn’t know why the town has declined to approve that plan.

Dozens of corps members attended Monday’s Town Board meeting, where town and corps members were scheduled to meet in executive session to discuss the contract.

However, Pinsky spoke twice during public-comment periods, demanding to know why correspondence between him and Dudziak had not been released to the public at previous meetings.

“We’re not doing this now,” Dudziak said as Pinsky delved into the mutual-aid disagreement.

“Why are you hiding it from the public?” Pinsky replied.

For now, town officials say they will hold the corps to the provisions of the contract, and Rural/Metro will be called when corps ambulances aren’t available.

The contract has a two-year renewal option, and either party reserves the right to forgo the extension by giving the other side 45 days notice.

Rural/Metro’s Bradley said his company would be interested in bidding on the contract if given the chance at the end of this year.

Lancaster Fire Chief James N. Robinson said he supports the work of the volunteer corps.

“However, if someone would ask me, ‘Do you care which company comes in on backup?’ I would say, ‘I don’t care, just give me an ambulance,’ ” Robinson said.

The dispute hasn’t affected town residents yet, Police Chief Gerald J. Gill Jr. said.

“Our department’s experience with the LVAC, this latest situation not withstanding, has been favorable. And, for the sake of the citizenry, we hope this fracas terminates promptly,” Gill said.

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Comments

BUFFALO USES RURAL METRO AND TOO MANY TIMES THEY DISPATCH BUFFALO FIRE THEY ARE TOLD THERE IS NOT A AMBULANCES AVAILIABLE FOR THEIR CALL AND THEY SOME TIMES TAKE
Hey Pinski, the first time you, iss a call might cost someone their life. Any company should be allowed and called. Whoever is first. Its an EMERGENCY!!!!! Is this not a free country with free enterprise? How can you keep someine else out? politicians blow, no spit.

The LVAC is a combination EMS agency, having a paid staff on duty 24/7 and supplemented by a volunteer staff. The fact they they were only unavailable for one out of hundreds of calls this year gives them a better record than one of our local paid services.

When a person calls for an ambulance, they need an ambulance NOW! They don't need politics, back-up ambulance services, volunteer services, they need the ambulance NOW! When someone calls in the town of Amherst, the call is answered in a timely fashion and right away! I can't believe that there would be any of this nonsense going on for even one minute. They ought to get rid of all volunteer ambulance services, and use the paid service all the time. I'm from Texas and we have a saying: "Go big or go home!" If the volunteer services can't provide 24/7 immediate coverage, then they ought to bow out gracefully. There should be such great service in place that when someone has a problem and they pick up the phone and call 911, the ambulance is there within five minutes or less. There is simply no excuse for playing politics, debating, arguing etc. This is about saving people's lives. Had this been a heart attack or stroke the additional wait time could have been catastrophic. It's time to wake up, man up, and get with the program and offer the public the services which their tax dollars are providing. And, the idea of a volunteer ambulance corp might or might not be a good idea, depending on whether they can provide the coverage or not. Still, I can't help but wonder why the welfare of the general public is not put first, instead of arguing and debating. If that was your mother or father having a heart attack in the middle of the night, would you want to wait the extra time and then get involved in an argument about who was supposed to cover? The obvious solution is to go with an all paid service no matter what. You get what you pay for. And, that still is true.
can somebody help me? so lvac are or are not volunteers?if they are volunteers and aren't happy can't they just quit?why do volunteers need a union?

GARY KING, CHEEKTOWAGA, NY on Wed Aug 17, 2011 at 11:05 AM

Moral of this story !!! Call your neighbor and ask them to drive you to the hospital. Are you guys kidding ???? Sure glad I don't live around you people. Cheektowaga has a ton of problems but when your sick and make that call for help thirty guys with blue lights block the entire street in a couple minutes. TRY IT , WORKS GREAT....

JOHN RUSSILLIO , BUFFALO, NY on Wed Aug 17, 2011 at 09:04 AM

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