Private service unveils tricked-out ambulance

Bronx-based company offers an ambulance with ambience—and then some: mahogany paneling, leather upholstery, widescreen TV with surround sound, 300-thread-count linens. The VIP treatment costs up to $350 an hour.

Gale Scott

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Think of it as an ambulance cross-bred with a limousine. The familiar perks are all there: mahogany paneling, leather upholstery, Wi-Fi and a widescreen TV—even the option of having drinks on board. But this baby comes with lights and sirens.

Citywide Mobile Response Corp. in the Bronx has launched VIP Luxury Ambulance, a vehicle staffed with a trained emergency medical team and available for hire at up to $350 an hour. The 40-year-old company, which also has a fleet of 100 regular ambulances, says the new deluxe “truck” (as ambulances are often called in EMS parlance) is the world's first.

It is the creation of Citywide's CEO, Henry Halpert, who bought the company in 1997. Thinking many New Yorkers would be willing and able to pay to have their ailing loved ones ferried to family events or entertainment venues in a nice ambulance—make that a very nice ambulance—Mr. Halpert dreamed up the idea for the plush vehicle. He then consulted with a firm that manufactures limousines and came up with its design. "We've got surround sound, indirect lighting, and 300-thread-count linens on the bed," Mr. Halpert said. The custom paint job is black and gold.

The alcohol is not an official perk. But neither is it prohibited. "We can provide a cooler," Mr. Halpert explained. (He added that they would "never serve liquor on the ambulance" and said he expects that families put only soft drinks and fruit juice in the cooler.)

The lights and sirens, however, are reserved only for use in medical emergencies.

The newly launched VIP medical vehicle is already turning heads. At TransCare, the city's largest ambulance company, with 600 vehicles, Senior Vice President Jim O'Connor said he and his colleagues are doubtful rival companies will follow Citywide's lead.

"We'll be watching them, but we're not talking to any limo-design companies; our experience has been that patients care more about the quality of medical care than what the ambulance looks like inside," he said, although he added that TransCare has a large TV in ambulances used for trips that are hours long. He also noted that the usual rate for private ambulance trips for purposes such as family events "works out to about $150; I'm surprised Citywide's able to get $350."

Then again, Mr. O'Connor added, television and film production companies in New York City routinely hire private ambulances to be on site during shoots. He could see a scenario in which actors learned of luxury ambulances and demanded them instead of stock vehicles.

Usually, patients or their families pay for the VIP service, although insurance sometimes pays for part of the trip if it is a medically necessary one, Mr. Halpert said. But insurers pay only the standard rate. "The additional cost for the Luxury VIP Package is a..."
non-covered service,” he said.

Despite its elegant appointments, the VIP ambulance is a state-certified vehicle with standard medical equipment as required by the New York Department of Health. “The state came out and inspected it; they said it’s beautiful,” he said.

So far, his VIP clients have included a seriously ill elderly man who wanted to see his grandson get married. “They dressed him up in a nice shirt, took him out of the nursing home, and wheeled him into the wedding,” Mr. Halpert said, adding that the emergency medical technicians joined in the dancing while monitoring their patient. “You should have seen the smile on the grandfather’s face.”

Mr. Halpert also recently hired the service to take his wife and newborn son home from the hospital in style. He’s even arranged shopping outings. “We had another customer who just wanted one more trip to Saks,” he said. “Whatever the client wants.”

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