State EMS leader defends rigorous training

By LOHR McKINSTRY
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---- — ELIZABETHTOWN — The state’s emergency-medical-services chief is defending expanded training requirements for emergency-medical technicians that are being blamed for a drop-off in volunteers.

State Emergency Services Director Lee Burns came to Essex County recently in response to local criticism of the state directive that increased emergency-medical-technician training from 120 hours to 140 to 170 hours.

Burns said she wanted to dispel the idea that the State Department of Health requirements make it hard to become an EMT.

“The training program is based on the national education guidelines,” she told Essex County officials and EMS personnel in a session at the Old County Courthouse.

“There was a push to get EMS providers trained in hazmat, WMD (weapons of mass destruction). We need them to have all this awareness.”

'MIXED MESSAGES'

The new material is what increased the hours of training required, she said, but they’ve also added new skills.

“What can we do to actually save people’s lives? We’ve added auto-injectors, allowing EMTs to administer a drug that reverses opiate overdoses.”

Supervisor Randy Preston (I-Wilmington), who chairs the County Board of Supervisors Public Safety Committee, told Burns the state is sending them mixed messages.

“I don’t feel Albany is listening to us. We are in a crisis in regards to EMS. People are calling 911 and not getting an ambulance. That is extremely disconcerting.”

'MOST NOT EMERGENCIES'

Burns blamed the drop in volunteers on hectic lifestyles.

“It is onerous; there’s no question about it. People can’t set aside time to volunteer because they’re so busy working. People’s lives are very, very full.”

One way to ease the burden for emergency services, she said, is to filter out the non-emergency calls.

“How do we get volunteers through the door? They’re just not coming,” she said. "We need to consolidate, use some economy of scale. Eighty-two percent of your calls are barely considered emergencies.”

Burns said Columbia County recently established a county ambulance squad, which is working well.
“They put ambulances in places where ambulances weren’t rolling.”

'TRAINING TOO IMMENSE'

Burns said she feels the dedication of the EMS community in Essex County remains very strong.

Preston, a former Wilmington fire chief, said he differs with her opinion on volunteers.

“The vast majority of the calls we’re responding to don’t need that high level of care,” he said. “We do have people joining our squads, and when they find out what the EMT (training) is, you tell them it’s a 100-plus-hour course, they say, ‘See you later.’ It turns them off.”

He said Gov. Andrew Cuomo is pushing tax caps for municipalities, but ambulance services can’t be funded except from property taxes.

“The training is getting too immense. I have spoken to doctors who say the increased training hasn’t changed the outcome. This is really a serious issue.”

'BILLING HELPS'

Essex County EMS Coordinator Patty Bashaw said she’s glad to see the Essex County Board of Supervisors is being proactive on the issue and trying to find solutions.

“Even though only 22 percent of our calls are life-threatening, we still have to prepare for those calls,” she said. “We need to think outside the box and say what can we do. Billing definitely does help.”

Burns said state law allows an ambulance district to be established in a community and set its own tax rate.

Fire districts with ambulance squads can’t now charge for calls, but legislation is in Albany now to allow such billing, she said.

LEGAL HURDLES

Clinton County Emergency Services Director Eric Day said some squads in his county are also having trouble finding volunteers.

“(So) we are transitioning away from fire-based EMS," he said. "We have one department who finally realized they aren’t getting out the door. It’s a bad situation for us.”

He said that department is now trying to contract with a paid ambulance service, but state law has legal hurdles that have prevented that so far.

Some towns have hired paid EMTs to cover shifts at local ambulance squads, and Crown Point Fire District has contracted with Lamoille Ambulance Service, a private EMS provider, for emergency medical calls.

“Everything you’ve said is happening in Crown Point,” Supervisor Charles Harrington (R-Crown Point) told Burns. “The lack of a medical director has been the bane of the ambulance service in Crown Point. To date they have been unsuccessful.”

State law requires every rescue squad to have a certified medical director.

'JUST THE BEGINNING'
Another problem is that young people who would join ambulance squads and fire departments are leaving the region after college or graduation from high school, Essex County Emergency Services Director Donald Jaquish said.

“It truly is a complex problem,” he said. “Young people are not staying here. That is one of the major issues.”

Mountain Lake EMS Council Executive Director Travis Howe said consolidation might be just sharing some things.

“Consolidation might be multiple vehicles, ALS (advanced life support) staffing. Look at your budgets and see how much could be saved by this.”

Preston said the one thing they all agree on is there is a major problem providing emergency-medical services.

“This isn’t the end of this conversation; this is the beginning. There has to be common-sense compromise.”

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