Otsego County launches ambulance service

- By Vicky Klukkert  Staff Writer

- Nov 15, 2021

Vicky Klukkert | The Daily Star Otsego County Board of Representative Chair David Bliss, Vice Chair Margaret Kennedy, E911 Director Robert O’Brien, Emergency Services Director Victor Jones, County Rep. Daniel Wilber and County Administrator Joshua Beams stand in front of the new county ambulance Monday, Nov. 15.
Otsego County officials announced Monday, Nov. 15, the county-operated ambulances would start operating Tuesday, Nov. 16.

Board Chair Rep. David Bliss, R-Cherry Valley, Middlefield, Roseboom, said the county ambulance service is a pilot program, which will be funded by federal American Rescue Plan Act funds for two years, while county officials come up with a way to fund the service in the future.

He said it would likely be modeled after the worker's compensation program, under which each town serviced pays a fee based on population, assessed value and number of calls made. The first two years as a pilot program will also allow the county to compile data to see where the service is used the most.

Rep. Daniel Wilber, R-Burlington, Edmeston, Exeter, Plainfield, who is chair of the Public Safety and Legal Affairs Committee, said the board has been talking about the lack of EMS coverage and how to help volunteer companies for about 20 years. He said the ARPA funds allowed the county to purchase two ambulances and hire 20 emergency medical technicians.

"If it weren't for the ARPA funds, we wouldn't have been able to do this," Wilber said.

Emergency Services Department Director Victor Jones said the ambulances are equipped with the latest technology and each has a mechanical CPR device so EMTs do not need to stand up in a moving ambulance and try to perform CPR on a patient.

The county has hired 16 basic or advanced emergency medical technicians, and plans to hire four more to staff the ambulances around the clock. According to a board resolution passed in August, the cost of the two ambulances was about $450,000. The cost to staff the service will be $1.2 million each year, Otsego County Administrator Joshua Beams said.

This will hopefully result in "quicker response times," E911 Director Robert O'Brien said.
According to O'Brien, outside of the city of Oneonta, the average response time for a volunteer squad to respond to the station, get to the call and then get the patient to the hospital is "two hours and five minutes. That's a very long time."

O'Brien and Jones explained the volunteer department will be dispatched first and, based on past data, the department that is usually called as the mutual aid to that district will also be dispatched. If the volunteer squad cannot get enough people to respond to the call after three tones, usually about eight minutes, the county-run ambulance will be dispatched to the call.

The county is analyzing data to see where the greatest need is and will station the ambulances in those areas, but the need is everywhere in the county, O'Brien said.

Jones said part of the reason calls aren't being answered is because "employers are not allowing employees to leave their job to answer a call." He said the demands on families also play a role. Beams and Bliss said training also plays a role as EMTs need a year's worth of training on their own time before they are eligible to respond to a call.

O'Brien, who is also the Hartwick town supervisor and a volunteer firefighter, said more than half of the ambulance calls during the past month have been mutual aid calls to other fire districts.

"We have had a lot of volunteers who are stressed and burned out," Wilber said. "The same six, seven, eight people in the squad are responding to all of the calls in the district. The same people who respond during the day are the same people who respond to a call at 2 o'clock in the morning."

Wilber said the county wanted to help those volunteers, some of whom have been hired by the county as EMTs.

"These are our heroes and we are here to back them up any way we can," he said.
Vicky Klukkert, staff writer, can be reached at vklukkert@thedailystar.com or 607-441-7221. Follow her @DS_VickyK on Twitter.