A firefighter is positioned on a blue aerial ladder, directing a powerful stream of water onto a two-story house that is heavily engulfed in flames and thick black smoke. The scene is dramatic, with the fire's glow illuminating the surrounding area. The firefighter is wearing full protective gear, including a helmet and oxygen tank. The house has a white porch with a lattice railing, and the roof appears to be made of dark shingles. The background shows more trees and a clear sky, suggesting a residential neighborhood.

Fire & EMS

2024

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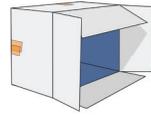
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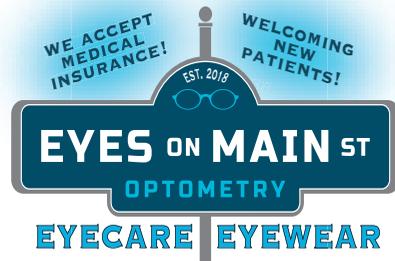
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That others may live

By TED WADDELL

SULLIVAN COUNTY, NY — It all started in 1862, when Army Major Jonathan Letterman established the U.S. Ambulance Corps within the Army of the Potomac, where he served as medical director.

Faced with horrendous battlefield injuries, he devised a new method of triaging the grievously wounded soldiers on the bloody fields of fire. The soldiers were then transported to medical care, rather than being left to suffer for days—which was the previous practice.

In creating the nation's first system of emergency medical management, Major Letterman was immortalized in history as the father of U.S. EMS, or emergency medical services.

In 1865, Cincinnati, OH set up the first civilian ambulance services, and in 1928, rural volunteer service started in Roanoke, VA with life-saving and first-aid crews.

By the 1950s, the beginnings of modern EMS were in place; funeral homes did most of the patient care, and reportedly operated nearly half of the country's ambulances.

In 1972, the U.S. Health Services and Mental Health Administration, under the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, became the lead agency for EMS, and a year later, the EMS Systems Act created 300 systems throughout the nation.

The Enhanced 911 Act of 2005 established a national 911 program to assess and improve public safety and communications, while the Federal Interagency Committee on EMS was charged with coordinating federal efforts and improving EMS systems.

And now, 162 years after Major Letterman founded the U.S. Ambulance Corps, Sullivan County has 17 EMS ambulance services proudly serving the area: Jeffersonville, Cochection, Livingston Manor, Lumberland, Mountindale, Tusten, Neversink, Rock Hill, Roscoe/Rockland, Bethel, Woodbourne, Mamakating, Highland EMS, Upper Delaware, Grahamsville and Mobilemedic—and most of these services are primarily staffed by cadres of dedicated volunteers.

And don't forget the nonprofit Hatzalah, reportedly the largest volunteer ambulance service in the nation.

Local agencies (not counting Hatzalah) responded to 16,708 calls for help in 2023, according to the Sullivan County Communications EMS Dispatch Report.

The situation locally

Alex Rau has served with the county's 911 emergency system for 28 years, and for the last 16 years as the 911 coordinator since taking over that critical position in 2018, and most recently adding the role of EMS coordinator to his position, in his words, "to bring together emergency medical services."

"It's been challenging in the last few years," he said of the current state of volunteer EMS. "There's been a decline in volunteerism." People don't have the time to commit to the work, "the landscape of EMS has changed; the public perception of EMS has changed; and the public need for EMS has increased."

As for issues facing EMS today, Rau said, "There's a huge increase in mental health calls, and the opioid epidemic has been a challenge in the EMS world." Services went to a



RR photo by Ted Waddell

EMS training in action. During a recent training session at the Livingston Manor Volunteer Ambulance Corps, EMT Kaitlen Madison learns about the indication for and use of iGel Supraglottic Airways under the watchful eye of LMVAC president and Sullivan County 911/EMS coordinator Alex Rau.

lot of repeat mental health and opioid overdose (OD) calls.

However, the situation regarding opioids is improving, he added. "Mental health is still an issue, but the opioid crisis is not affecting EMS as it has in the past."

Rau noted that in the recent past, the 911 dispatchers were handling two or three OD calls per day, per shift. It put "a big strain on our emergency medical services and law enforcement."

He said there's a widespread public perception that an ambulance and crew should respond to a call within a few minutes, but that within the "last four years, there's been a decline in the commercial [EMS] services."

This puts a strain on volunteers, who then "provide mutual aid to the commercial sector" which historically has provided EMS to the more populated areas of the county.

"It's safe to say that if we didn't have the nonprofit volunteer sector, we'd be in a much bigger world of trouble," he said.

And yet, on the ever-present topic of getting volunteers in the door and keeping them, Rau said that "working alongside our partners in the Joint Sullivan County Recruitment & Retention Task Force" means that recruitment is going fairly well, "while we're finding that retention is the biggest issue... now that you have a member, how do you retain them?"

State aid?

Compounding the problem is that currently in New York State, EMS is not considered to be an essential service and thus is not funded by taxes levied by local municipalities.

Taxes pay for fire and police services.

"From a moral point, it sets the tone that EMS is not essential—but they should be side by side with fire and law enforcement," explained Rau. "They all provide a very critical role in a first-response system. You can't have fire and police without a medical arm."

According to Rau, Rock Hill, Mamakating, Highland and Cochection have recently adopted taxing districts to help fund local ambulance services. And according to the New York State Association of Counties (NYSAC), statewide there are proposals and legislation to make EMS an essential service. (See "Rescue EMS," page 7.)

Rau noted that the costs of providing EMS "are staggering; it's no longer just using Band-Aids and gauze pads."

'A lot of support' from the county

Emergency services has "a lot of support coming from the [county] legislature this year to make improvements in EMS locally," Rau said, singling out the efforts of Scott F. Schulte, Sullivan County's commissioner of public safety, as "very motivated."

Luis Alvarez, chairman of the county's public safety committee is "very vocal in improving the EMS system," Rau said. "It's taken us 60 years to get where we are today, We're not going to fix it overnight. It's not one single thing we can do as a government entity. It's going to take some time, but we're working on it."

Some information comes from emsmemorial.org and medictests.com.

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Compiled by TED WADDELL

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There are first responders, such as fire departments, emergency medical services and law enforcement agencies. There are also numerous investigative organizations.

This list includes the various agencies that serve the Upper Delaware River Valley.

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dep.pa.gov

"The Department of Environmental Protection's mission during emergencies and disasters is to respond quickly and professionally to any incident which adversely affects the health and safety or the environment of the citizens of the Commonwealth," according to the DEP website. Information on specific situations can be found at www.health.pa.gov/topics/prep/Pages/Disasters.aspx.



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Sullivan County Department of Emergency Management/Homeland Security

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www.sullivanny.us

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Wayne County Emergency Management

43 Volunteer Dr.
Honesdale, PA 1831
570/253-5970 ext. 4220
www.waynecountypa.gov

Provides planning, training and resources relating to disaster response, preparedness and more; also mitigates emergencies that affect the people, property and land in the county.



Wayne County Sheriff's Department

925 Court St.
Honesdale, PA 18431
570/253-2641
waynecountypa.gov/500/Sheriff

The county sheriff and deputies work with the Court of Common Pleas, arrest fugitives, assist other law enforcement agencies, issue concealed-carry permits and more.



Pike County Sheriff's Office

412 Broad St., Suite 5
Milford, PA 18337
570/296-6459
www.pikepa.org/courts__law/sheriff_s_office/index.php

The county sheriff handles bomb disposal, assists other law enforcement agencies and more.



Pike County Emergency Management

135 Pike County Blvd.
Lords Valley, PA 18428
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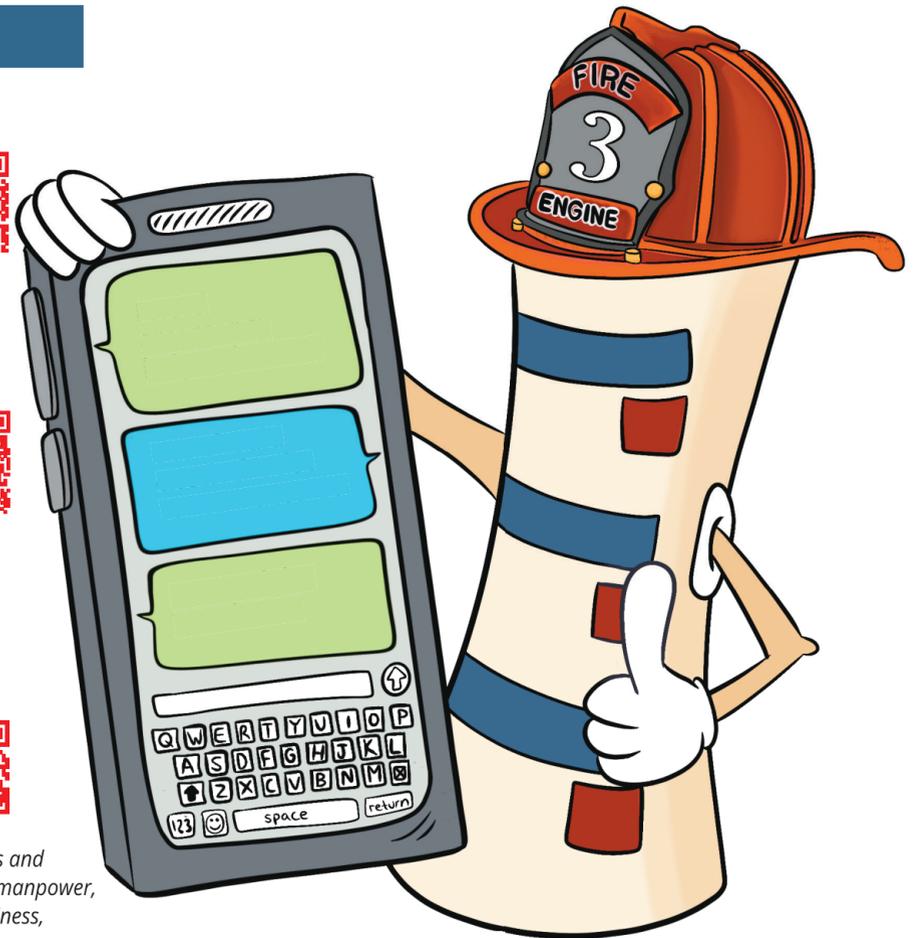


Illustration by Amanda Reed

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"Volunteers do not necessarily have the time; they just have the heart"

— Author Elizabeth Andrew

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YOUR CARE. YOUR WAY.

Rescue EMS

By TED WADDELL

NEW YORK STATE — Volunteer emergency medical services (EMS) in the Empire State are hurting, and a quick-fix bandage isn't the cure.

Steve Kroll, chair of the New York State Volunteer Ambulance and Rescue Association (NYSVARA), is spearheading efforts to enhance EMS across the state, as the organizations are facing a critical shortage in funds, while the demands for services are increasing.

NYSVARA was founded in 1939 as a nonprofit group representing volunteer ambulance professionals and organizations throughout the state.

As of mid-April, legislation to fix the problem—multiple bills introduced by different legislators—was still in committee in both the Senate and Assembly.

“EMS services across New York State are in crisis,” Kroll said in a recent article by Spectrum News. “We are not paid what it costs us to actually take care of somebody who is a medical patient—we lose money on every one of those—and one of the bills [before the NYS legislature] will correct that by increasing our rates.”

According to Kroll, another bill would assist in the implementation of telemedicine, in situations he described in the story as “low acuity needs,” aka calls that don't require an ambulance transport to the emergency room.

As advocates traveled to the state capital to make a pitch to lawmakers, calling on them to address this critical situation, they stressed that local communities don't have the resources or statutory authority to create county-wide or taxpayer-funded EMS programs to meet the ever-mounting financial hardships.

Under the slogan “Rescue EMS,” they and others involved in EMS are asking the state to rectify the existing situation. Currently counties and local municipalities are barred from establishing joint taxing districts for EMS services.

Creating a district would make EMS comparable to taxpayer-funded law enforcement and fire services.

The overall goal of the comprehensive legislative package would permit the establishment of such a district, and in essence would recognize EMS as an “essential service” similar to police and fire. Key recommendations of the proposed legislation also include the elimination of the property tax cap for EMS services and authorization of Medicaid reimbursement for treatment in place and for transportation to alternative destinations. The latter, according to the New York State Association of Counties (NYSAC), would get a patient to the most appropriate health care facility (not just a hospital), such as a mental health clinic or urgent care.

The legislation would allow volunteer firefighter and ambulance personnel to claim both state income and local property tax credit. It would also increase the personal income tax credit for volunteer firefighters and ambulance corps members from \$200 to \$800 for those eligible, and from \$400 to \$1,600 for married joint filers.

It would put in place a Medicaid rate increase for EMS providers. This way, ambulance services would be reimbursed at a rate that comes closer to the cost of providing the service, according to NYSAC.

Finally, it would require the NYS Thruway Authority to issue permits to EMS vehicles, similar to those for fire service apparatus—so they don't have to pay tolls on the Thruway.

“This group of bills is very important for an area like ours that is so dependent on EMS,” said Assemblywoman Aileen Gunther (D-100). “These pieces of legislation are extremely helpful to EMS services across the district.”

For more information about this issue, call NYSVARA at 877/697-8272, or visit www.nysvara.org.

Some information in this story comes from the New York State Association of Counties.



Photo by Erik Mclean on Unsplash

A bill is working its way through the New York State legislature that would support volunteer emergency services.

At a time of emergency

Volunteers are in short supply

By JEFF SIDLE

Emergencies happen anytime, day or night. In particular, a fire or a medical issue requiring immediate action and transportation can happen to all of us.

Traditionally in rural areas, these needs were met by concerned citizens with a great sense of service who were willing to run out on their family and/or work obligations to serve as volunteers to help protect their neighbors whenever the fire or ambulance put out the call.

At a time when most people worked in the community, volunteers were able to drop what they were doing and deal with the emergency at hand. But now, as people are commuting to jobs further afield, volunteers able to respond, particularly during the daytime hours, has become a critical shortage.

Additionally, with new technology and new laws developing at a fast pace, the burden on the volunteers has grown. Volunteers are called upon for additional hours of training, fundraising, maintenance, repair, public image (parades) and meetings.

On top of all this, many devoted members are aging out of the line of duty. And there is a lack of young people willing or able to take on the time constraints needed to join an emergency services corps.

Those in the fire and EMS services, particularly Stan Pratt, past chief of Honesdale Fire Company, say that new residents from urban areas where paid emergency service personnel staffed the rigs and engines don't understand the costs involved that would need to be passed on to the tax base to ensure coverage.

In many cases, the all-volunteer companies ensure that property taxes remain low. Pratt recalls a time some 15 years ago when he was asked by the Honesdale Borough Council what the fire department was providing to the borough. He sat down and worked out the figures.

"If the Honesdale Fire Department came down and parked their firetrucks in your parking lot and said, 'Here, you run them,' it would cost \$3.4 million dollars a year (based on a 15-year amortization on equipment). At that time, the Honesdale Borough's budget was under \$1 million. I'm not sure what that figure would be in today's dollars," he said.

To encourage participation, Pratt advocates for a state or county volunteer retention program rather than recruitment. This, he says, would develop a workforce base if volunteer services eventually give way to paid municipal or county departments.

Lackawaxen Township has done just that. The township offers a stipend of up to \$250 for fire/ambulance volunteers who meet certain minimum standards in order to qualify, according to Kathy Wargo at Lackawaxen Ambulance. Dave Ruby, Milford Borough Office of Emergency Management



RR photo by Jeff Sidle

Pictured is Honesdale Protection Company No. 3's Silsby Steamer fire engine in operation for demonstration purposes in Honesdale, PA on Sept. 12, 2009. Purchased new in 1875 and rebuilt in 1890, the engine saw service until 1936. It was completely restored in 1986. The oldest operable Silsby Steamer in the U.S. can be seen at Protection Company No. 3's fire hall on the corner of North Main and Park Street in Honesdale.

"There is a tremendous amount of trust placed and expected in return of every member; that is part of becoming a volunteer. It doesn't happen overnight, and it takes a lot of work."

— Wayne County Commissioner Brian Smith

Coordinator, said that Dingman Township offers a similar program.

Wayne County Commissioner Brian Smith said that there are ongoing conversations with Wayne County's volunteer fire and ambulance companies to establish a similar program with financial incentives for volunteers on a county-wide level.

"You have to be careful for what you ask for," Smith points out, "You don't want 250 new volunteers showing up just to take advantage of an incentive. The fire and ambulance companies function as a team when training and showing up at an emergency scene. There is a tremendous amount of trust placed and expected in return of every member; that is part of becoming a volunteer. It doesn't happen over night, and it takes a lot of work."

Kenny Batzel, a volunteer with White Mills Fire and Ambulance reported that fire department and ambulance calls average about 1,500 calls per year, with 90 percent or

more of those being ambulance calls. White Mills Ambulance is financially supported by Palmyra Township and Texas Township, as well as patients' insurance billing. Their primary coverage area includes four townships, with aid to two additional townships when requested. Their catchment area includes Milford, Route 84, Hamlin and Gouldsboro.

"We are in the process of going paid," Batzel said. "We have one EMT right now. We've got to start out small to see if it works. Our volunteers are getting beat up pretty good." He also said that initiating a paid service does not reduce the need for volunteers. Paid positions free up the volunteers whose role they assume and those volunteers fulfill other duties within the department. "We have a second ambulance. The second ambulance will go out on volunteer, and I think as of right now, the weekends are going to be volunteer, too." Paid service will be during weekday business hours when most of the calls occur.

Pike County Office of Emergency Management Director Tim Knapp confirmed that the county match program initiated in January 2022 makes approximately \$2.3 million dollars available to Pike County municipalities via a matching grant to help fund ambulance service coverage that doubles a municipality's annual EMS contribution up to a maximum of two mills. The program has been successful in keeping the county covered with paid ambulance service and has significantly reduced response time. Knapp also noted that the Pike County Training Center provides training to all Pike County fire companies at no charge.

If you're not up for the heat of the moment, volunteer opportunities continue when the crews get back to the station. Hose needs to be racked, engine rooms need to be swept and linens need to be changed. Fundraising is a year-round job. There's something for everyone who has the time and the inclination to provide life-saving service to their community. Beyond the satisfaction of helping friends and neighbors, the rewards will give you much-needed skills, training for how to react to emergencies and a sense of community. All essential services in this rural landscape.

To volunteer, check out the contact information on pages 4 and 5.