The Ledger

NEWS

'The Ambulance Is on Its Way' Can Be Empty Pledge in Suffolk

PATRICK HEALY New York Times

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Summer was waning, and Bob and Phran Ginsberg were driving to their Suffolk County home after enjoying a dinner with their two teenagers, savoring their company before school resumed and everyone shot off in disparate directions.

Then, in a split-second crash of metal and glass, everything changed. The black Mazda driven by 19-year-old Jonathan Ginsberg skidded on a dark, slick curve in Lloyd Harbor and plowed into a sport utility vehicle. When Mr. and Mrs. Ginsberg came upon the scene in their own car seconds later, they found Jonathan and his sister Bailey, 15, unconscious. Mr. Ginsberg said someone nearby had heard the crash and called 911, but 20 minutes later there was still no sign of an ambulance.

That night in 2002, the Ginsbergs discovered what is often the stark reality of ambulance service in Suffolk County: a patchwork of autonomous and sometimes feuding ambulance companies whose ranks of volunteers are declining, routine failures to record crucial emergency data and waiting times of 30 minutes or more for an ambulance.

State data shows that the average response time of emergency services in Suffolk is slower than in Nassau and Westchester Counties.

"The system is failing," said Mitchell Savino, a former chairman of the county's Regional Emergency Medical Services Council, a state-chartered oversight group, which monitors ambulance service"Are people dying? Sure. People are dying because of this. Just listen to your scanner."

Again and again in interviews, paramedics, police officers, rescue officials and patients' families voiced feelings similar to Mr. Savino's, many sharing accounts of a system that imperils people when they are at their most vulnerable.

As New York City prepares to spend millions of dollars to overhaul its 911 system, critics say it is time to re-examine Suffolk's emergency response network, which relies solely on dozens of independent volunteer companies. The council that monitors the county's companies is pushing for major improvements and greater oversight to raise Suffolk's performance to the level of neighboring Nassau and Westchester Counties.

The county's Department of Fire, Rescue and Emergency Services says it is trying to recruit more volunteers and to improve its response times, but the department chairman, David H. Fischler, said responders did an "excellent job most of the time" and referred to county data showing that a majority of ambulance calls are answered within nine minutes, the ceiling for an acceptable response time set by the county's oversight council for ambulance service..

But a report prepared in March 2003 by the council and based on state data found that Suffolk's average response time was about 12 minutes per call, compared with 8 minutes in Nassau County and 9 in Westchester. County officials say those figures have changed little in the past year. The quality of emergency response data in Suffolk is one of the main impediments to determining accurate response times. In a digital age, county dispatchers still record 911 callers' information with pencil and paper and walk the forms to other dispatchers who radio local ambulance companies. If an emergency call requires both fire and ambulance services, dispatchers must fill out the same form twice.

Suffolk County was recently awarded a long sought state grant to overhaul and automate its computer dispatch system.

An examination of hundreds of thousands of records for the last two years found that tens of thousands of entries were missing the location of a call, the time an ambulance left the station, or the time it arrived at the scene of an emergency.

Without good data, paramedics and officials with the county's ambulance council say, Suffolk's ambulance companies cannot properly analyze their performance and detect weak points in the system.

An examination of the county's data showed that the county received 110,000 emergency medical calls last year, and in more than 7,000 cases, callers waited 15 minutes or more for an ambulance. In at least 202 cases, that wait stretched on for 40 minutes or longer.

In emergencies like heart attacks or strokes, seconds can mean the difference between living and dying, experts in emergency medicine say. The brain begins to die four to six minutes after the heart stops, and the chances of surviving a heart attack drop to 10 percent if emergency care does not arrive within 10 minutes.

Some response delays are caused by Long Island's notoriously clogged roads and highways, and the sheer physical size of Suffolk County, which covers 912 square miles, but critics say the majority can be traced to dispatch problems and the structure of the ambulance network.

Suffolk's system is rooted in volunteerism and local control, two principles that long defined early suburban life in New York State. Today, 98 local agencies some fire departments, some individual ambulance corps operate the 236 ambulances that respond to 911 calls, said David Brenner, the chairman of Suffolk's oversight council for ambulance service.

The county and the council monitor all the agencies, but the ambulance companies are not part of any broader government agency.

Many are nonprofit corporations financed by local taxes. They set their own rules for how many hours a station is occupied, and how soon a dispatcher can radio another ambulance agency for backup if a company fails to respond to a first call. Some companies wait four minutes before putting out a broader call while others wait 10, said Dr. Jeanne Alicandro, the director of the county's Division of Emergency Medical Services.

Some ambulance corps respond to calls in other districts every day, thanks largely to a mutual-aid dispatch system, but Dr. Alicandro said many companies were still quite territorial. Some go out of their way to avoid crossing into a neighboring district when on a call, emergency officials said. Some companies hire paid responders but do not allow them to take calls from adjoining districts, Mr. Savino said. Some ambulance services have merged in recent years or hired paramedics to handle calls when few volunteers are available. But most of the services are still part-time, all-volunteer companies that handle a few hundred calls every year.

Next door, in Nassau County, service is more reliable because paid police ambulances answer about three out of every five calls for help, Suffolk county officials said.

Even the harshest critics of the Suffolk system have few complaints about the people racing to calls. In one night spent with volunteers at the Huntington ambulance corps, eight volunteers sat poised to answer calls, and a dispatcher monitored the phones and radio. When emergency tones blared, the crews ran to their trucks and reached homes in a few minutes.

But often, at many stations, no one is around to handle calls. More people are calling 911, but emergency medical technicians said the blue-collar and middle-class residents who have long made up the bulk of volunteers now work two or three jobs to afford the cost of living on Long Island.

"People don't have as much time to put into it," said Rich Becker, a volunteer emergency medical technician in Holbrook. Last year, there were 17,845 calls in Suffolk where departments described the result of the call. In those cases, 4,681 calls were passed on to a different agency after the first failed to respond.

Last month , the regional Emergency Medical Service council imposed new, stricter dispatch standards over the objections of some fire and rescue associations. They call for dispatchers to seek help from a second ambulance company if the first crew fails to respond to an alarm within two minutes.

But some emergency medical technicians questioned whether top-down directives like this can work in a system in which agencies have long been islands unto themselves.

"They can make protocols, but who's going to enforce the changes?" said Mr. Becker, the Holbrook emergency medical technician. "There's very little control with the volunteer departments. They do their own things."

For the people left waiting in living rooms and by the sides of roads, the minutes tick by as emotions go from worry to rage to disbelief. Some call 911 again and again to ask about the delays. Still others grow so frantic that they drive a loved one to the hospital themselves. When Bob Ginsberg found himself in that position in September 2002, he said, he sprinted down a dark stretch of road in Lloyd Harbor in a futile search for a doctor for his two teenage children. Mr. Ginsberg said an ambulance did not arrive for 25 minutes, and county records do not provide a clear picture of what happened that night, including the exact time between the crash and the arrival of the ambulance.

Jonathan Ginsberg survived the crash, but Bailey died at the hospital. Mr. Ginsberg said he did not know whether anything could have saved Bailey that night, but the lost minutes plague him.

"It makes me sick to my stomach," he said.