

EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICE INTRODUCTION

When you have an accidental injury, feel unusual chest pains, are unable to breath freely, have a diabetic episode, etc, you expect a prompt and reasonably priced response when you dial 9-1-1. Santa Barbara County contracts with American Medical Response (AMR) to provide this service. The Grand Jury (Jury) reviewed the current contract with AMR.

BACKGROUND

The 2000-2001 Grand Jury investigated the “Existing Emergency Medical Service System”¹in the County. This Jury investigated the operation of the current contract with AMR. During this investigation, the Jury heard many instances of outstanding service performed by the ambulance crews and the dispatchers.

The Process

When a person believes a need for an ambulance exists, they dial 9-1-1 and reach a Public Safety Answer Point (PSAP). Except for the City of Santa Barbara, the PSAP relays all medical emergency calls to the Santa Barbara County Public Safety Dispatch Center (Dispatch Center) for handling. Upon receipt of a call, the Santa Barbara County Public Dispatch Center relays the call, per Emergency Dispatch procedures, to the proper agency. AMR responds with an ambulance in the proper California Health and Safety Code (Response Codes 1, 2 and 3) response requested by the Dispatch Center. The Santa Barbara County Fire Department also responds to all calls.

The Santa Barbara County Public Safety Dispatch Center differs from the City program in that the City program is staffed by Emergency Medical Dispatchers operating under established medical protocols. The Emergency Medical Dispatchers are able to ask medically relevant questions, provide meaningful advice per the protocol and prioritize the dispatch of the ambulance. The balance of the County uses Emergency Dispatchers who are not medically trained nor do they have access to medical protocols. The Dispatch Center performs only Emergency Dispatch not the Emergency Medical Dispatch available in the City of Santa Barbara and neighboring Ventura County as well as many other counties. It was also noted the same physician is serving as Emergency Medical Director for both Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties.

Upon completion of the response, AMR invoices the requesting party at rates specified in the current County contract. This contract does not require the acceptance of an “assignment of benefits”. Acceptance of an “assignment of benefits” obligates the provider of the care to accept the fee determined by the receiver of benefits’ insurance

¹ See Grand Jury website www.sbcgj.org

company or Medicare. Effective April 1, 2002 the Federal Government required all ambulance fee schedules to be based on an assignment related basis for Medicare patients.

Under the current County contract, no fee is permitted unless AMR actually performs a transport function. Thus, if AMR only performs paramedic services, it is not permitted to bill for such service.

An additional processing task, necessitated by certain performance criteria in the contract, is the tracking of the timely performance of AMR by the Dispatch Center and the reporting of these results to the County Emergency Medical Services Department. Currently, this task requires manual entry of performance data received from the Dispatch Center by AMR before the reports are available to the County Emergency Medical Services. The current contract requires AMR to pay \$10,000 per month and to assist the Dispatch Center in developing a Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) system for this task.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding 1: Santa Barbara County Public Safety Dispatch Center is not staffed by trained Emergency Medical Dispatchers.

Finding 2: Santa Barbara County Public Safety Dispatch Center does not have a written policy or proper protocol established for dispatchers regarding interrogation, prioritized dispatch and pre-arrival instructions. Without such a policy and protocol, the County is open to liability should a Dispatcher erroneously offer "Good Samaritan" medical advice.

Finding 3: The Santa Barbara County Public Safety Dispatch Center and a software Consultant have been working to install and modify a CAD system to provide the County Emergency Medical Services Department with electronic data so that it can monitor AMR's response time as required by the existing contract.

Finding 4: Individuals with billing problems or questions must work via telephone or mail with AMR's central billing office located outside Santa Barbara County.

Finding 5: AMR is not permitted to invoice for any service provided unless a transport service was completed.

Recommendation 1: The Grand Jury recommends the Sheriff expedite the training of all Emergency Dispatchers to be Emergency Medical Dispatchers. The proper training would improve the safety of the ambulance crews and the general public by authorizing trips not requiring lights and sirens or the response of the Fire Department.

Recommendation 2: Adopt the medical protocols offered by the County Medical Director of Emergency Medical Services. These protocols are presently being used by Ventura County.

Recommendation 3: Expedite the Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) System effort, presently in final testing, permitting the County Emergency Medical Staff to monitor AMR performance without the manual efforts now required of AMR.

Recommendation 4: The County should arrange for the availability of a local office for users of AMR services to meet with AMR to resolve billing and payment issues. This should be included in the AMR contract.

Recommendation 5: Add a classification to the County contract to cover services furnished by AMR that do not include ambulance transport. The Federal Government is recognizing this new charge for Medicare patients as Paramedic ALS (Advanced Life Support) Intercept (PI).

AFFECTED AGENCY

Board of Supervisors

Finding 1
Recommendations 1 through 5

Public Health Department

Finding 2,4, 5
Recommendations 2,4, 5

Sheriff's Department

Finding 1, 2, 3
Recommendation 1, 2, 3

Santa Barbara County Fire Department

Finding 1, 2
Recommendations 1, 2