

Rensselaer County EMS 'is in a crisis'



By Doug La Rocque

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CENTER BRUNSWICK – The meeting room at the Center Brunswick fire station was filled to near capacity as Dr. Warren Hayashi held an informational meeting on the status of Emergency Medical Services (EMS) in Rensselaer County.

He told those gathered: “EMS is in a crisis.”

Dr. Hayashi works in emergency medicine at the Albany Medical Center Hospital and is the medical director for the Rensselaer County Bureau of Emergency Services, the Town of Colonie’s EMS systems and several others.

He has been analyzing EMS data for two years, and in effect laid the cards on the table.



services center from, each time they respond to a call for help, no matter how small. They can bill insurance companies, but the reimbursement is about half of what it costs each time that ambulance rolls off the floor. The rest has to be made up by donations, fundraisers and money from their respective towns, villages and cities.

This sometimes becomes even more egregious for EMS services surrounding the towns of Brunswick and Poestenkill. Neither has an ambulance service nor a contract with a paid service, such as the Mohawk Ambulance, to provide coverage. They need to rely on neighboring communities in a medical time of need.

The kicker here is that this is not legally considered mutual aid, because neither community can reciprocate. This means the responding organization technically cannot bill for their services in these towns.

Mohawk Ambulance has a garage located in Brunswick but without a contract with the town, often is not available to respond.

Another problem is staffing. Many of the county’s rescue squads rely on volunteers, though some, in the larger municipalities, have paid staff. Attracting Advanced Medical Technicians (AMTs) or Paramedics is tough, partially because of pay levels and partially because of organization, said Dr. Hayashi.

He noted many AMTs and Paramedics live in the county but work for organizations in other localities because the overall working conditions are much improved.

The way the county’s EMS response system is set up is another major downfall, he said. While a few are staffed with AMTs and Paramedics, most are not. When a Basic Medical Service ambulance is called, the severity of the patient’s

condition often dictates an AMT or Paramedic be summoned as well. Many times, their response can be 30 to 50 minutes, or sometimes even not at all. This is particularly a problem in the county's rural areas.

Dr. Hayashi said he would like to see a multi-community approach, with consolidation of services to include Paramedic-staffed crews around the clock at all ambulance locations.

He said this could be paid for by tax districts with revenue based on area populations or each municipality's property assessments. He mentioned some grants that might be available to defray costs, and also said Rensselaer County itself should help out.

Dr. Hayashi also suggested that Rensselaer County look to how its neighboring counties are operating. Many have taken the multi-community approach with one corps serving many towns. He mentioned Washington and Columbia counties as models in particular.

Another, Albany County, serves its rural areas with a Sheriff's Department ambulance service. Greene County is currently looking into a county-owned ambulance service which would replace the 10 ambulances corps currently operating there.

This is the second such meeting Dr. Hayashi has held. The first, several weeks ago in Poestenkill, was also well attended. The doctor said he plans additional gatherings in other parts of the county.