



Photos by Will Waldron/Times Union

Craig McMillan, executive director of Sand Lake Ambulance, at the station house in West Sand Lake on March 28. A Rensselaer County public safety leader is highlighting inequity in response times for towns that do not have Advanced Life Support services.

# A patchwork of ambulance services

One Rensselaer County leader is highlighting response times by town



The North Greenbush Ambulance station on Main Avenue in Wynantskill. North Greenbush Ambulance is a volunteer ambulance partly funded by the town that now also staffs paid employees.

By H. Rose Schneider

Two months ago, Sand Lake Ambulance was facing a dilemma. Dispatchers reported a 6-month-old was choking in a nearby town, which didn't have an ambulance available. But Sand Lake wasn't authorized to respond there.

"Somebody stepped up and said, 'We'll go,'" Craig McMillan, executive director of Sand Lake Ambulance, said.

The infant survived, but the ambulance broke its own rules when it responded due to the patchwork of ambulance services and municipal agreements in Rensselaer County.

"The challenge we have in Rensselaer County is the EMS systems sort of grew up  
*See AMBULANCE, A12*

## AMBULANCE

From page A1

spontaneously," said Warren Hayashi, an assistant professor of emergency medicine at Albany Medical College and medical director for the Rensselaer County Bureau of Public Safety.

The county has 15 dedicated ambulance services, state data shows. It's far from being the lowest total statewide (Orleans and Chemung counties each have one ambulance program listed) or even locally (Fulton and Montgomery counties have three and five listed, respectively), but those involved in EMS point to consolidated ambulance programs in nearby counties as evidence services can be improved. Albany County staffs an EMS unit through its sheriff's office and Ulster County announced last month it would pursue a countywide mutual aid agreement and invest nearly \$5 million in improving EMS services.

Cities like Troy are addressing similar issues after a report

found its city-run fire and ambulance service was struggling due to stagnant staffing, increased demand and longer emergency wait times.

Independent of the county, Hayashi has hosted meetings over the past month in the towns of Brunswick and Poestenkill, presenting data from last year's 911 calls and discussing how parts of Rensselaer County can improve EMS services. It's this call data that reveals the disparities, he said. In North Greenbush, an ambulance arrives on average just over nine minutes after a 911 call. Across the town line, in Poestenkill, it's just under 28 minutes. And while North Greenbush and Sand Lake had a paramedic arrive in less than 20 minutes about 95% of the time, towns like Berlin, Nassau and Stephentown saw responses that timely less than 8% of the time.

Rather than a dedicated ambulance, towns like Poestenkill and Brunswick have a "handshake agreement" with Mohawk Ambulance, Brunswick



Will Waldron/Times Union

**Sand Lake Ambulance paramedic Tim Lasher, left, and Executive Director Craig McMillan stand in the ambulance bay on March 28 at the station house in West Sand Lake.**

Town Board member Mark Cipperly explained. The private ambulance service has six stations in the Capital Region, including one on McChesney Avenue in Brunswick.

"For the most part, for all those years, it was advantageous to Brunswick — we paid

nothing for it," Cipperly said of the longtime situation.

But since the coronavirus pandemic, resources have been stretched thin and response times have lagged, he said. The town is now gathering information on a handful of ways it could expand its ambulance

service — whether that's by securing a paid contract with Mohawk Ambulance or another private ambulance to provide a dedicated service (similar to Cohoes' contract with Ambulnz), or establishing its own. Cipperly said the hope is to have a referendum vote on a new model this year.

Since 2014, when its volunteer ambulance closed due to a lack of staff, Poestenkill has been weighing its options for an EMS service. In 2021, 72% of voters shot down creating a town ambulance. Under the current system, volunteer firefighters provide basic life support until Mohawk Ambulance arrives. If they aren't available, dispatchers can put out calls for service, but this is complicated by the fact Poestenkill doesn't have a mutual aid agreement with another town, Supervisor Tom Russell said.

Sand Lake Ambulance shares a border with Poestenkill, but not a mutual aid agreement. State law requires an ambulance respond only where it

**SEE AMBULANCE, A13**

## AMBULANCE

From page A12

is certified to operate in areas stipulated in a mutual aid agreement. Responding to a call elsewhere risks liability and means an ambulance can't bill insurance, McMillan said. North Greenbush Ambulance is less than half a mile from Brunswick's town line but doesn't have a mutual aid agreement there either, Ryan French, North Greenbush's director of operations, said.

Like Poestenkill, the town of Sand Lake once had an all-volunteer ambulance. It now operates as a nonprofit with paid paramedics and EMTs, ranking second behind North Greenbush for fastest response times on average. The town pays just under half of its operating expenses while the other half is covered by medical insurance billing, McMillan explained.

"But there's limits to how much money they can provide us, and we can't just go out and get more ambulance calls," McMillan said. "Partnering with other agencies makes sense for us, too."

North Greenbush Ambulance also operates as a nonprofit with a subsidy from the town. While it is considered volunteer-based, it now mostly operates with paid staff. French said the town would also benefit from an expanded mutual aid agreement (Sand Lake and North Greenbush currently have mutual aid agreements with each other, and in East Greenbush; North Greenbush also partners with Troy and Schaghticoke).

"A town of North Greenbush resident does not always get a six-minute response time and does not always get a North Greenbush para-



Jim Franco/Times Union

**Dr. Warren Hayashi stands next to an ambulance outside Albany Medical Center Hospital in Albany.**

medic," French said. "If we had a more robust mutual aid system, this would be less of an issue, but we don't."

Cipperly said a joint ambulance service with one or more other towns is also being considered in Brunswick. But if a town wants to do that, it needs to establish its own ambulance first in order to create a mutual aid agreement.

Meanwhile, Poestenkill's supervisor does not believe the town can rely on its own ambulance service. Instead, the town is looking at other municipalities to partner with in a mutual aid agreement. Russell said more town meetings will be held this month to present the case for an ambulance service.

"The towns have to move forward and address this together," he said, later adding, "We can't stand as an island. We cannot."

### Basic life support vs. advanced life support

While Poestenkill saw the longest average time for an ambulance to arrive, a paramedic's arrival took even longer in other towns, according to Hayashi's data. In Stephentown, it averaged over 33 minutes. In Berlin, it was over 37 min-

utes. Even where French lives in Grafton, it took on average 30 minutes for a paramedic to arrive. While each of these towns has an ambulance, they are not among the five agencies in the county that offer paramedic care — or advanced life support. "Sometimes just getting an ambulance there isn't enough and there needs to be a paramedic for that ambulance," French said.

Basic life support, or BLS, and advanced life support, or ALS, have important distinctions. EMTs are trained to administer basic life support like splinting, bleed control or administering an epipen or defibrillator, French said. Paramedics are trained to administer advanced life support and can intubate, start intravenous therapy and interpret electrocardiograms for signs of a heart attack.

A few weeks ago in Pittstown — where a paramedic arrives in less than 20 minutes 29% of the time — a paramedic never arrived for a 16-year-old who was critically ill, Hayashi said. He was taken to Samaritan Hospital in Troy, where he was stabilized in what Hayashi called "a near miss."

SEE AMBULANCE, A14

## AMBULANCE

From page A13

### What does Mohawk Ambulance have to say?

New York has lost 10% of its ambulance services over the last decade, state data shows. While commercial ambulances account for less than 9% of these services, they answer 47% of all emergency calls and 78% of non-emergency calls.

Around five years ago, Mohawk Ambulance moved its Troy station — as well as its one-ambulance garage on Brick Church Road in Brunswick — to its current McChesney Avenue location, hoping a more central spot would expand its access to rural parts of the county.

"We're very much in support of the town of Brunswick and Rensselaer County funding their EMS needs," J.P. McPartlon, vice president and general counsel for Mohawk Ambulance, said.

Ideally, he said, that would be a dedicated service with a subsidy to support the cost of readiness there. He noted response times can sometimes be chalked up to the size of Rensselaer County — which at more than 650 square miles is bigger than slightly half of the other counties in New York — and the time it takes traveling from the Brunswick station to more rural areas. "For that, you need funding. You need to financially support an EMS system," he said. "Relying on the [insurance] fees for service, it's not realistic."

But adding a new ambulance service could force existing ones to shutter, he said. "EMS is an extremely delicate system," he said. "When you bring in another agency...it disrupts that system...The result of

all this is more and more taxpayer dollars needed year after year to replace the system."

In a March 13 letter shared with the Times Union and addressed to Hayashi and Brunswick Town Board member Mark Balistreri, Mohawk Ambulance claimed Hayashi had inflated response times for the town. McPartlon said the letter "speaks for itself," and the company reviewed its data and found Hayashi's to be "significantly different than what internal reports showed."

"My data comes from Rensselaer County Bureau of Public Safety," Hayashi said. "It's analyzed the same way for everywhere, but I don't have access to Mohawk's data."

### What does the county have to say?

When asked about disparate response times,

Rensselaer County spokesman Rich Crist said EMS remains the responsibility of municipalities.

"We're definitely following the situation, but the law stipulates ambulance and EMS service is a local responsibility," he said.

He did not expound on what law he was referring to, but state law does dictate how a municipality must apply for an ambulance service to serve an area.

And while the possibility of a county or countywide EMS service in Rensselaer County has been considered for some time, Hayashi doesn't believe it's currently possible.

He's instead advocating for the sharing of services or mergers between towns that could eventually grow into a countywide system. In his presentations, he's pitched over three dozen different shared-service agreements. Calculating what agencies could make from insurance billing, a system covering the entire county outside of Troy would add about \$128 a year in taxes on a \$300,000 home, he said.

"The big takeaway is if you don't fund a system or staff a system appropriately up front, there won't be someone in your time of need," he said.



Gold is  
at an 8-Year  
High

## Now is the time to sell!

Call for a Private Appointment (518) 438-4810

We buy gold, platinum, silver, diamonds, Rolex watches and estate jewelry in any condition for immediate payment!

**PHILIP ALEXANDER**  
Jewelers

471 Albany Shaker Road - Next to Lanie's Cafe, Loudonville, NY 12211  
PhilipAlexanderJewelers.com • email: PhilipAlexanderJewelers@msn.com

Monday-Friday 10am-5pm & Private Appointment, Call 518-438-4810

Receive and EXTRA 10% when you Trade-in  
Towards New Merchandise!