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For two rescue squads, community backing key to life or death

Thursday, March 11, 2010

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The Record
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This year marks a happy 75th birthday for one rescue squad in Passaic County. For another, it's a time — after 77 years — to angrily announce its imminent death.

And the diverging fates of the thriving Pompton Lakes Riverdale First Aid Squad and the doomed Haledon Emergency Ambulance Association illustrate the strained balance all such volunteer units maintain.

One gets fiscal and logistical support from local government, and enough community volunteers and donations to keep going.

The other faces cash-strapped, bickering local governments that can't replace ambulances, and communities where it's tough to attract help and funding.

"We have the support of the town and it's remained consistent: They will help when we need it," said Mark Sonne, captain of the Pompton Lakes squad, which serves its hometown and Riverdale. And though volunteering is down, the squad still boasts 65 members, 45 of them active.

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"Most people volunteer because they are dedicated," Sonne said. "They like to help the community and people."

That's the norm, too, among crews of the Haledon Emergency Ambulance Association (HEAA), which serves Haledon, North Haledon and Prospect Park.

But this month, it said it would end service as of next February. Chief among its reasons: failure of local governments to replace dying ambulances, and — despite voters' wishes — to start a stipend program for retiring volunteers.

"It's the lack of financial support from the towns," agrees North Haledon Mayor Randy George, whose community has stood ready to help the squad — if Haledon and Prospect Park do their bits first.

The HEAA in 2009 asked each town to buy a new ambulance to replace three 12-year-old vehicles.

But North Haledon officials argued that, after they spent \$200,000 to convert a firehouse into a rig building, Haledon and Prospect Park should buy the first two and North Haledon

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the next two. But Haledon and Prospect Park prefer restoring one old rig for \$4,500 to \$7,500 and buying a used one from Glen Rock for about \$50,000, rather than spending up to \$200,000 for a new one.

Haledon Mayor Domenick Stampone said he has wanted "assurances" from the HEAA "that they would be able to respond to calls. If I am spending taxpayer money, I don't want a situation where they say they're going to close down. They simply don't have the bodies to keep afloat."

He's been meeting with the Paterson Fire Department about backup.

Prospect Park Mayor Mohamed Khairullah did not respond to numerous calls for comment.

HEAA Capt. Bob Fousse is saddened by the divorce.

"They should never have bought the rigs all at the same time," he said. "They now have the same birth date. This is also the first year we didn't get the usual \$15,000 from each town for operating expenses, and it darned near takes every penny of that for insurance, repairs, utilities."

In contrast, the two boroughs backing the Pompton Lakes squad pay half the \$105,000 needed yearly for upkeep of two ambulances and medical supplies.

The building is in Pompton Lakes, which also assumes member recertification that costs "a

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couple thousand dollars" every five years, said Sonne. Riverdale pays for diesel fuel, which costs "at least \$5,000," said Mayor William Budenheim, "and we paid \$18,584 for a clothing allowance."

The rest comes from fund-raisers, including a golf tournament, mailings and a wine tasting.

"Financially, we break even," said Sonne. "If anything is left over, it is put away for other equipment and the towns help out when we need it."

Recruiting is done on Web sites and by word of mouth.

But at the HEAA, Fousse said membership that once was at more than 100 is now at 25 active, and "of those, 16 are very active, others have gone on one call."

"We have very little commerce or industry. We're known as a bedroom community, so people work out of town," Fousse said. "As a result, we have a hard time answering calls in town."

Yet last year, the HEAA answered 1,700 calls from a combined population of 23,000.

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The Pompton Lakes squad answered 1,300 calls from a combined population of about 14,500. It also dispatches, and Wanaque's First Aid Squad responds to calls every other weekend.

The Pompton Lakes unit, too, has seen a drop in volunteers. But notably, some sign-ups are driven by family tradition.

"We have a father and daughter, a husband, wife and father-in-law," said Sonne. "We're also lucky to have volunteer firemen, nurses and police officers. We've got a lot of camaraderie."

Its roster even includes Borough Administrator Vito Gadaleta, a certified EMT.

"I feel that it's my obligation to participate," said Gadaleta. "There is an active spirit of volunteerism in Pompton Lakes, and the First Aid Squad is a beneficiary of that volunteer spirit."

But he fears for the future of such volunteer units, as does Sonne, who cited the two-paycheck family as having less time to volunteer, making for longer hours for those who can.

When he joined 24 years ago, Sonne said, there were 13 crews alternating weeknights, but "now we have five night crews. We work four days a month, almost 70 hours. It's an 11-hour shift and that's not including 'all calls,' or calls when you're not on duty. You

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have to be more flexible with scheduling today."

Lack of volunteers is a reason many squads have turned to paid EMTs or teamed with hospitals. George, North Haledon's mayor, said his town plans to create a local volunteer squad "and have it supplemented" by St. Joseph's Medical Center in Wayne.

Fousse said hospitals are "anxious to take this over and to do it on a paid basis." He added, "I feel sorry for the people who are going to be billed when the insurance doesn't pay for it all."

Gadaleta, for one, doesn't accept paid squads as inevitable, but reflected that the stress on volunteer units is "a serious problem that gets more serious every day. But we're going to work until our last breath so that volunteer EMS doesn't disappear."

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