

## **EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES – ARE WE COVERED?**

The public at large may rarely think about emergency medical services, let alone government's role in providing them. This can suddenly become very important when faced with an actual emergency. The provision of timely, efficient, cost-effective and skilled emergency medical services can provide a comfort and sense of security in the public mind.

### **WHAT DO WE NEED?**

It is always in the interest of government at all levels to provide a range of services the public might reasonably expect, even though the services may not be widely known – or appreciated. Of particular interest to the San Luis Obispo County Grand Jury is the establishment and operation of a privately-owned ambulance service, together with emergency medical services through local government agencies.

Government has an interest not only in keeping its population healthy but also in ensuring that it is protected and served in its time of greatest need. Such is the argument for government-sponsored services that will respond to emergency situations. San Luis Obispo County believes there needs to be some government sponsorship in ensuring that people caught in emergency situations have a safe and reliable means to get from the site of the emergency to hospital care.

The Grand Jury also has an interest in the provision and delivery of services by certified Emergency Medical Services (EMS) personnel, and has researched this area to determine if it:

- is extensive enough in its scope,
- provides coverage to the entire county,
- delivers the best possible outcomes from emergency situations, and
- is cost-effective.

## **SUMMARY**

In its deliberations, the Grand Jury was mindful that across the population of the county there would be a wide-ranging point of view about what constitutes a reasonable level of County support and involvement in providing emergency services. The Grand Jury was also mindful that a wide-ranging review of emergency medical services could be complex, involving multiple services and agencies within the county. The Jury decided to limit its report to a review of paramedic and emergency medical technician services. It is those services that are called upon every day of the year and which the citizenry is likely to experience.

## **PURPOSE**

The Grand Jury chose to investigate this topic in the belief that the public deserves to know the quality and efficiency of services being provided in emergency situations under County jurisdiction. We were particularly interested in the numbers and disposition of EMS personnel in emergency response vehicles. The Jury also recognized that if those needs were being met the County would deserve acknowledgement and support for its initiatives and practices.

## **ORIGIN**

The decision to undertake this investigation/review was initiated within the Grand Jury and is not the result of an official complaint.

## **PROCEDURE**

The Grand Jury interviewed officials from both County and State agencies and San Luis Ambulance. Internet resources were used for additional research.

## NARRATIVE

We researched two categories of emergency medical personnel:

- Emergency Medical Technician (EMT), and
- Paramedic.

**EMTs** are trained and qualified responders who provide a limited range of medical services in emergencies and typically as part of a responding emergency crew throughout the county. They are proficient in their skills, have undergone mandated training and are certificated by the County. They are required to update their skills through annual in-service training and are able to perform basic medical services on emergency calls. They provide Basic Life Support (BLS) level of care, which is defined as follows:

**BLS:** emergency first aid and cardiopulmonary resuscitation procedures which at a minimum include recognizing respiratory and cardiac arrest and starting the proper application of cardiopulmonary resuscitation to maintain life without invasive techniques until the victim may be transported or until Advanced Life Support (ALS) is available. (County Memorandum of Agreement dated 1/9/2018)

**Paramedics** are more highly trained than their EMT counterparts. They undergo more rigorous annual training and education as part of their certification renewal process and provide a significantly higher level of medical care in emergency situations. They are registered through the County Office of Emergency Services, which also enforces state and county regulations as required. Paramedics provide ALS level of care, defined as follows:

**ALS:** for ambulance services, means special services designed to provide definitive pre-hospital emergency medical care, including but not limited to, cardiopulmonary resuscitation, cardiac monitoring, cardiac defibrillation, advanced airway management, intravenous therapy. Administration of specific drugs and other mechanical preparations and other specified techniques and procedures administered by authorized personal under the direct supervision of a Base Hospital as part of the local EMS system at the scene of an emergency during transport to an acute care hospital and during inter-facility transfer. (County Memorandum of Agreement dated 1/9/2018)

The County uses two agreements to provide the emergency services required of its contractors:

1. A contract (called a Memorandum of Agreement) with the San Luis Ambulance Service, a privately-owned and operated corporation
2. A contract (called the Cooperative Fire Programs Fire Protection Reimbursement Agreement) with Cal Fire

### **Memorandum of Agreement**

The current contract with the San Luis Ambulance Service has a term of 4 years and can be renegotiated to reflect the changing needs of the county. This contract is extensive in nature and specifies a number of parameters that the ambulance service must meet in providing services to the county, metrics that measure the performance of the contract, and the fees which are appropriate for each service, among other administrative requirements. The contract is a public document.

In accepting and complying with this contract, the ambulance service provider is given exclusive rights to provide both emergency and regular ambulance services throughout the county as a sole vendor<sup>1</sup>. Some features of the contract include:

- response times to various parts of the county,
- the provision of paramedics on every ambulance call,
- a complete cost structure for the various levels of service provided,
- a maximum profit margin, and
- a strict reporting protocol of performance against contract metrics.

The Grand Jury studied the contract and interviewed various people familiar with its contents and reporting obligations, as well as reviewing the process by which the contract was negotiated, amended and is managed.

The intent of the Grand Jury inquiry into the ambulance service was to ensure that:

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that the northwest corner of SLOCO is covered by Cambria Community Health District and has a mutual aid agreement with San Luis Ambulance and Cal Fire.

- the aim of the contract to provide the public with an efficient and cost-effective service is being met,
- each ambulance carries at least one fully trained, accredited, and certified paramedic on all calls,
- the performance requirements are being both measured and met, and
- the citizens of the county are receiving a level of service reflecting their needs.

The Memorandum of Agreement between the County and San Luis Ambulance Service includes a plan for the deployment of ambulances:

The general goal of the Deployment Plan is to provide an Advanced Life Support (ALS) Unit, either by Contractor or by an ALS fire service agency, to at least 90% of all potentially life-threatening emergency ambulance requests originating within each Emergency Response Area with a maximum response time of:

- 10 minutes in areas designated urban
- 20 minutes in areas designated suburban
- 30 minutes in areas designated as rural
- 60 minutes in areas designated as remote

(See attachment 1)

Urban, suburban, rural and remote are defined by the California State Emergency Medical Services Authority, EMSA#101: EMS Standards and Guidelines Part 1, as follows:

**Urban:** All census places with a population density of >100 persons per square mile; or census tracts and enumeration districts with census tracts which have a density population of >100 persons per square mile.

**Suburban:** All census places with a population density of 51-100 persons per square mile; or census tracts and enumeration districts with census tracts that have a density population of 51-100 persons per square mile.

**Rural:** All census places with a population density of 7-50 persons per square mile; or census tracts or enumeration districts without census tracts which have a population density of 7-50 persons per square mile.

**Remote:** Census tracts or enumerations districts without census tracts which have a density population of <7 persons per square mile.

While the County has no commitment to managing air ambulance services within the county, those services are available in emergency situations. Air ambulance service is provided by CalStar based in Santa Maria.

### **Patient Airway Protection**

In an emergency, protecting a patient's airway is of primary importance and often requires a form of intubation. San Luis Obispo County has a policy as to who can perform endotracheal intubation and limits that function to ALS certified personnel (paramedics) who undergo periodic retraining and re-certification. Intubation (inserting a tube directly into the trachea) is a potentially dangerous process if not done correctly.

Most other counties in California have approved use of devices to protect the airway that is nearly as effective as endotracheal intubation but do not require formal certification and so can be used by non-paramedic EMTs. San Luis Obispo County has yet to approve use of these devices.

## **COOPERATIVE FIRE PROGRAMS AND EMS SERVICES**

The County has a contract with Cal Fire for the provision of emergency services throughout the county in areas not served by local fire services. The Board of Supervisors approves an annual appropriation for this contract through the County Fire Officer, who is also Unit Chief for the San Luis Obispo Cal Fire unit.

The contract, called the Cooperative Fire Programs Fire Protection Reimbursement Agreement, works on the basis that the County pays Cal Fire for actual expenses incurred in meeting the requirements of the contract. Cal Fire invoices the County quarterly.

Of particular interest to the Grand Jury was the provision of EMT and paramedic services on Cal Fire emergency vehicles: whether there were sufficient numbers, under what operational circumstances, and at what cost.

Of the 16 County-funded engines managed by Cal Fire, all are staffed with at least one EMT, but only three are staffed with paramedics. These three engines are based at the Los Osos, Nipomo, and Mesa stations.

Cal Fire has an obligation “to ensure that employees are adequately trained to provide the types of Emergency Services...at the BLS [EMT] and ALS [paramedic] levels.” (Cooperative Fire Programs Fire Protection Reimbursement Agreement 1/23/2018)

## **CONCLUSIONS**

While some people might like to see more medical emergency personnel deployed around the county, the Grand Jury recognizes that good governance requires cost-effective use of funds to deliver adequate protective services to its population.

It is the conclusion of this Grand Jury that the County is providing a level of emergency services commensurate with the needs of its population.

## **FINDINGS**

F1. Provision of paramedics in the ambulance service meets the requirements of the negotiated agreement.

F2. Multiple agencies provide paramedic and EMT services.

F3. EMSA negotiates all costs for the ambulance service.

F4. San Luis Ambulance Company INC. has the sole contract to provide medical transportation services for the county.

F5. Only three of the 16 Cal Fire engines funded by the County have paramedics.

F6. San Luis Obispo County does not allow non-paramedic EMTs to use devices approved in other counties to protect an airway in case of medical emergency.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

R1. Additional paramedics should be provided on County-funded engines and added to the next contract.

R2. The County EMS Division should approve more options for airway protection by BLS personnel using equipment that limits risky outcomes. This should be accomplished by January 1, 2020.

## **REQUIRED RESPONSES**

Board of Supervisors shall respond to R1 and R2.

County Public Health, Emergency Medical Services Division shall respond to F6 and R2.

The San Luis Obispo County Fire Chief shall respond to R1 and R2.

The responses shall be submitted to the Presiding Judge of the San Luis Obispo County Superior Court by July 23, 2019. Please provide a paper copy and an electronic version of all responses to the Grand Jury.

## **AGENCY RESPONSE REQUIREMENTS**

The Penal Code Section 933.05 that specifies the format and methodology for agency responses is listed below. All agency respondents are required to respond to all findings and recommendations in the following manner:

- If the respondent disagrees wholly or partially with an item, the respondent must elaborate on the portion of the item that they disagree with, and provide an explanation.
- If a respondent notes that an item will be implemented in the future, the response must include a timeframe for implementation.
- If a respondent notes that an item requires further analysis, the agency must include in the response an explanation of and the scope of what will be studied and the timeframe needed for the study. The timeframe for follow-up from the agency cannot exceed six months.

- If the item will not be implemented or is not reasonable, the respondent is required to provide a detailed explanation.

**933.05. Findings and Recommendations**

- (a) For purposes of subdivision (b) of Section 933, as to each grand jury finding, the responding person or entity shall indicate one of the following:
- (1) The respondent agrees with the finding.
  - (2) The respondent disagrees wholly or partially with the finding, in which case the response shall specify the portion of the finding that is disputed and shall include an explanation of the reasons therefore.
- (b) For purposes of subdivision (b) of Section 933, as to each grand jury recommendation, the responding person or entity shall report one of the following actions:
- (1) The recommendation has been implemented, with a summary regarding the implemented action.
  - (2) The recommendation has not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future, with a timeframe for implementation.
  - (3) The recommendation requires further analysis, with an explanation and the scope and parameters of an analysis or study, and a timeframe for the matter to be prepared for discussion by the officer or head of the agency or department being investigated or reviewed, including the governing body of the public agency when applicable. This timeframe shall not exceed six months from the date of publication of the grand jury report.
  - (4) The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted or is not reasonable, with an explanation therefore.

Presiding Judge	Grand Jury
Presiding Judge Ginger Garrett Superior Court of California 1035 Palm Street Room 355 San Luis Obispo, CA 93408	San Luis Obispo County Grand Jury P.O. Box 4910 San Luis Obispo, CA 93403

