



Ben Brink/Times-Union

Ray Murray, left, and Maria Thorpe of the Greece ambulance company unload Gordon Earl at Rochester General Hospital.

An alarm for ambulance volunteers

County's 25 corps are in a staffing bind because members' numbers have declined

By SCOTT MARTELLE
Times-Union

Phyllis Broutman used to spend three eight-hour shifts a week as a volunteer ambulance medic, even though she worked full time and had a husband and two teen-age children.

But when her husband, Leonard, died a year and a half ago, Broutman's schedule — and priorities — changed.

"Doing 100 percent of the parenting certainly has cut into my ambulance work," said Broutman, 45, of 75 Valiant Drive, Henrietta.

Now, between raising the teen-agers and teaching nursing at Monroe Community College, she can't squeeze in more than one shift a week at Henrietta Ambulance Service Inc., she said.

Similar changes in lifestyle — more often forced by economics than by death — and shifting interests have left Monroe County's 25 volunteer ambulance corps in a bind, said Thomas Schlegel, Monroe County emergency services director.

Fewer people are volunteering, and those who are have less time to give.

"All volunteer groups are having problems. . . . It's a common trend. There's a decrease in the amount of available time to volunteer," Schlegel said.



Ben Brink/Times-Union

Card games fill a slow moment during a Greece ambulance shift.

County ambulance corps

Continued

Corps officials say the problem is critical.

"Within the last two months we've come within a half-hour of going out of service," said John Geery, operations director for the 120-member Greece Volunteer Ambulance at 867 Long Pond Road. "We've had people call in sick to their regular jobs so they could fill in."

CORPS OFFICIALS say they fear fewer volunteers — and a drop in the time the volunteers donate — will mean delays in the arrival of ambulances in situations where seconds can mean life and death.

"We still are able to cover our shifts," said Craig MacMillan, operations director of the 120-member Perinton Volunteer Ambulance Corps. "But there are times when we do have to rely on one or another" of the other corps.

That's done through a mutual-aid system in which the volunteer corps serve as backups to each other. If one corps can't find enough volunteers for a shift, calls are referred to corps serving adjoining districts. The same system is used if available crews are busy when another call comes in.

"There's always a backup to a backup to a backup," MacMillan said. "There's always an ambulance available, but (summoning) it could have an effect on the response time."

That response time is the reason most of the suburban corps exist. Because their stations are closer, they can respond to calls more quickly than city-based, paid services like Monroe Medi-Trans Inc. and National Ambulance.

GEERY of the Greece corps lays most of the blame for staffing troubles on the economy.

"Peoples' lifestyles are being forced, through economic circumstances, to change," he said. Most affected by that, Geery and others said, are day-time shifts, which traditionally have been filled by homemakers or people who work late shifts in factories.

"You've got the housewife who used to work for the volunteer corps out working (a paying job) three or four days a week," Geery said.

And more men are putting in longer hours at one job or holding down a second job, Geery said.

Even people who don't work outside the home, or single people who don't have family commitments, are developing other interests, Geery said.

In Greece, overall membership has dropped from about 120 in 1979 to about 112 at the end of 1983. No statistics were available on the amount of time each member serves with the corps.

Although more people belong to the Henrietta corps now than did five years ago, individual volunteers are donating less time, Palmer said.

George Haberberger, Henrietta operations director in 1979, said most of the increase in membership stems from rule changes. Where five years ago volunteers had to be town residents, the corps now accepts anyone who earns state certification.

About 40 of the 145 members are out-of-town residents, said Haberberger, the corps' treasurer. Many are city residents, where there are no volunteer corps, he said.

THE CORPS ARE TRYING to attract new members by posting notices on community bulletin boards and in weekly newspapers.

In Henrietta, the corps includes membership applications in the mailing of circulars for the annual fund drive.

While finding new members is a logical solution to the staffing problems, the directors say it's not a complete answer. It takes months to train volunteers to meet state requirements, which means recruiting new volunteers offers little relief for corps facing immediate staffing problems.

"The level of training that people have to maintain today is higher than it was in the past," MacMillan said.

Medics in state-certified volunteer ambulance corps must be emergency-medical technicians, a rank attained after months of study. Volunteers formerly needed only to have passed basic or advanced first-aid training courses, he said.

People who would volunteer a few hours each week as ambulance tenders aren't willing to spend months in training, the directors said.