

Ambulance emergency treatment fast becoming a 'catch-all' service

By Kay Gordon
Staff writer

In little more than a decade, emergency treatment has advanced from catch-can to catch-all.

In the 1960s, most ambulances were either privately owned or operated through hospitals or funeral homes. Rescue squads operated through local fire departments, and volunteer community groups helped provide first aid treatment.

The Midlands area, including Lexington County, was no exception.

Mike Drennon, Emergency Medical Service coordinator for Lexington County, said the county had a wide range of individuals and organizations who were the forefathers of "what we now call EMS."

At some point in the late 1960s, Columbia decided to contract with the Charlotte-based Columbia Ambulance Service for emergency calls, Drennon said. Then, they contracted with Paramed Inc., parent company of Carolina Ambulance Service.

At the time, there were no federal or state guidelines for operating local ambulances.

State rules and regulations followed, and the state Department of Health and Environmental Control was appointed to oversee emergency service.

At Midlands Technical College, people were required to take an 81-hour course to train as Emergency Medical Technicians. And, DHEC administered a 150-question test following the course.

The state also prescribed what equipment should be stocked on ambulances.

Lexington County contracted with Columbia to provide ambulance services and set up four sub-stations throughout the county, one each in Irmo, Swansea, Cayce-West Columbia and Batesburg.

Almost at the same time, around 1973, the paramedic concept was coming into being throughout the country. Three successful programs were already established in Los Angeles County, Cincinnati, Ohio, and Jacksonville, Fla.

And in 1974, the Lexington County EMS was born.

Drennon and Mike Catoe, one of the shift supervisors for Lexington County EMS, were both part of the metamorphosis.

Drennon, head of Lexington County operations for four years, has worked with Lexington County EMS for 10 years. Before that, he worked with Columbia Ambulance Service, and was an EMT, a paramedic in North and South Carolina and an EMT instructor.

Catoe, who began in 1971 with Carolina Ambulance Service, remembers the first Lexington County EMS 30-day training course in December, 1973.

On Jan. 1, 1974, Lexington County EMS began with 10 people — two shifts of four with two shift supervisors for four substations. That first month, they received 235 calls.

Today, there are seven substations throughout the county in Chapin, Irmo, Swansea, Cayce, Batesburg, Lexington, and Lexington County Hospital. They are all tied into the central communications center in the basement of the Lexington County Administration building in Lexington. There are also volunteer rescue squads in Pelion and Batesburg.

Each substation is equipped with one ambulance for 24-hour service. At all times, an EMT and a paramedic are on duty at each of the substations. Today, the staff numbers 51 and they run an average of 600 emergencies a month. The EMS stations serve 150,000 people in a 708-mile radius.

Today, the basic EMT course, still administered by Midlands TEC and regulated by DHEC, consists of 96 hours. After passing the state board test, the person may apply for a job as an EMT, but there are no guarantees. Becoming an EMT employed by EMS or a rescue squad with life-support systems is the first prerequi-



Staff photo by GINGER PINSON

Evelyn Matthews discusses job at the Cayce substation

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site for future paramedics. The person also must take a 500-hour course taught by Midlands EMS Association and offered through various hospitals. Every three years, the license must be renewed.

When an emergency call comes in, EMS personnel should be able to respond anywhere in the county

within 14 minutes. They are allowed two minutes response time from the substation to the ambulance for calls which range from gunshot wounds, heart attacks and wrecks to obstetrics.

Most emergencies deal with coronaries and accidents, Catoe said, with the Cayce substation receiving the greatest number of calls because of a high population density. The Chapin substation receives the fewest calls, he said.

EMTs and paramedics work 24 straight hours, with 48 hours off. They rotate among substations.

But EMTs and paramedics are not simply ambulance drivers. They provide immediate care on the way to the hospital. Under direct medical supervision, paramedics can perform advanced life-support devices, such as starting IVs, administering drugs, placing tubes in windpipes, splinting breaks and so on. EMTs may perform basic first aid techniques, such as stopping bleeding, bandaging and basic CPR.

They know every road and trail in the county. They have to. They also have to know people, and how to handle sensitive and difficult situations. No day or night is ever the same. Some may be slower than others, but they are always on guard, ears tuned for the ring of the telephone.

