

EMS shifts cut to boost job's appeal

Lexington County tries to bolster recruiting, trim ambulance response times

By APRIL SIMUN
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Lexington County officials are hoping to end a paramedics shortage and keep paramedics more alert by cutting workers' 24-hour shifts in half.

The county has struggled for years to hire and keep paramedics and to cut lagging ambulance response times.

Shortening shifts should help curb the problems, officials say. County Council voted 7-0 Tuesday for the changes, which would cost an extra \$315,000 a year for additional pay if the county were able to fill its staff.

"Twenty-four hour shifts are very, very tough on individuals," said Councilman Jacob Wilkerson, who heads council's health services committee. "And I don't think they're very good for the people they're taking care of either. I'd rather have somebody that's pretty fresh coming to take care of me than someone who's at the end of a 24-hour shift."

The county hasn't had any reported incidents of improper care because of a paramedic's fatigue, EMS director Tom Gross said. "But it certainly is a potential."

Attracting more paramedics to Lexington also means getting more ambulances on the road. The county has about 25 of 39 paramedic positions open, but seven of the jobs might soon be filled. The county has hired extra EMT workers to supplement the paramedics shortage.

Still, the county runs four fewer ambulances during daytime hours than it would with full staffing, Gross said. And fewer ambulances means longer waits for one to arrive on a scene.

The county system has been responding to 90 percent of its calls within 19 minutes, Gross said. Medical experts call the ideal a response time of eight to 12 minutes in suburban areas.

The paramedics shortage isn't unique to Lexington County. Nationwide, agencies have complained of the problem. Although 24-hour shifts are a tradition in EMS, many urban areas have already converted to 12-hour shifts, said Cliff Parker, president of the S.C. EMS Association.

Richland County converted in 1992. The switch helped attract paramedics by making the job more palatable, said Richland EMS spokesman George Rice.

Senior paramedic Mica Squires with Lexington County said changing her hours will be an adjustment. But she looks forward to spending more time with her 6-year-old daughter.

"I'll be able to sleep at home every night," she said. "I think it'll help out our recruitment a great deal."

Parker said he, too, thinks the switch could help recruitment. "They certainly don't have anything to lose by trying," he said.

The county will implement the change gradually, starting with EMS stations at Boiling Springs, Irmo and Lexington. After a new budget year starts July 1, the county would look at changing shifts at Swansea, Batesburg-Leesville, Pelion, Hollow Creek and Chapin in that order.

Meanwhile, the county would switch the 24-hour shift stations from one day on and two days off schedules, to one day on and three days off. Cayce and South Congaree converted to 12-hour shifts about three years ago because of heavy call volumes there.