

How EMS is battling shortages

County is in desperate need of paramedics to fill vacancies

By JEFF STENSLAND
Staff Writer

Lexington County is looking for a few good men and women to help save lives.

The county's Emergency Medical Services is making a plea for more ambulance workers to fill a shortage of nearly 30 slots, or about 36 percent of the entire staff of emergency medical personnel, officials say.

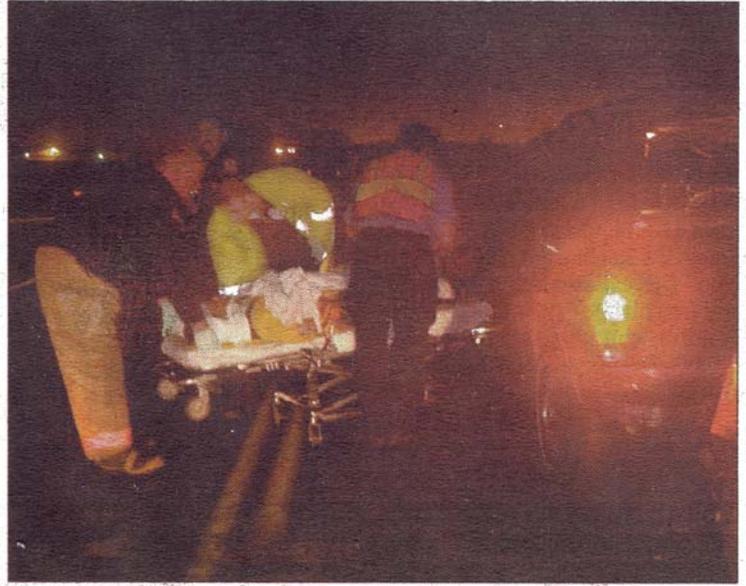
County ambulance service director Tom Gross said ambulances already aren't able to provide advanced life saving services in all

cases. "We've had high turnover and shortages for several years. I can't pinpoint when it went from a nuisance to a real problem," Gross said.

The paramedic shortage isn't unique to Lexington County. Other, more rural counties, also need more staff, according to a statewide ambulance worker organization.

Lexington County has three categories of ambulance personnel: paramedics, who are the most highly trained and most in demand; Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs); and Intermediate Medical Technicians.

EMTs are qualified to provide basic life support, such as bandaging patients and using heart defibrillators.



Senior paramedic Mark Vadney, center, and EMT Brygger, right, prepare a patient for transport to the hospital.

SEE EMS PAGE 2

Paramedics can provide those services, but also administer drugs, give intravenous fluids and interpret EKG readouts.

Lexington County's shortage became severe enough that Gross sought and received \$300,000 from County Council in September for nine new EMT positions.

All but five of the now 44 EMT jobs are filled, figures supplied by Gross' office show.

But the positions amount to a Band-Aid for the bigger shortage of paramedics, the best trained of the ambulance personnel.

**The State
Newspaper
November 2001**

Lexington County has a 50 percent shortage of paramedics, with only 27 of the 54 jobs filled, Gross' office said.

Paramedics are getting help from a handful of supervisors who are qualified paramedics. The supervisors make ambulance runs, too, said David Shull, one of those answering medical calls.

Shull estimates the county needs a minimum of six more paramedics in order to run its ambulance service well.

Ambulance service supervisors have resorted to other make-do measures.

They reserve paramedic-staffed Advanced Life Support ambulances for larger emergencies, and dispatch more Basic Life Support ambulances, Shull said.

By comparison, the Richland County ambulance service has a paramedic on every ambulance that goes on a call, a Richland County spokesman said.

Gross said that despite the paramedic shortage, Lexington County is still providing good emergency service.

"This is not a crisis. We are managing to maintain coverage," he said, adding that paramedics put in overtime to compensate.

Shull said some paramedics work close to the maximum of 78 hours per week allowed by federal workplace safety rules.

Gross said there are many reasons for the paramedic shortage, but rapid growth in Lexington County tops the list.

In the 1990s, Lexington was

one of the fastest-growing counties in the state, with almost a 30 percent increase in population between 1990 and 2000, according to U.S. Census Bureau statistics.

Low salaries are another part of the problem.

While senior paramedics can earn nearly \$40,000 a year, entry level pay is about \$25,000 for EMTs and about \$27,700 for paramedics.

Cliff Parker, president of the South Carolina EMS Association, says some counties, such as Charleston, start paramedics at about \$35,000.

Another complication is the time it takes to train paramedics.

In July, the state more than doubled the number of hours required to achieve paramedic certification, raising it from 424 to 1,000.

The increased training allows paramedics to gain a more extensive knowledge of anatomy and physiology.

Because Lexington County already has a shortage, finding the hours to go through the training can be difficult.

But many of those who put in the time often find it worth the effort, Gross said.

Artie Chavis joined the county ambulance service seven years ago as an EMT and became a paramedic about four years ago.

"The best part of the job is making people feel comfortable in traumatic situations," Chavis said

"As a paramedic, you also get to be the boss when you go out on calls."

While other professions have fallen on hard times in economic slowdowns, Chavis said paramedics always are in demand.

"The job security is great. Everyone always needs to call 911," he said.

Parker, president of the statewide association, said South Carolina is suffering a paramedic shortage. He estimates the state needs about 400 more.

Some counties that can pay more money are fully staffed, but more financially strapped counties are facing shortages, Parker said.

"A paramedic who's willing to move around for more money will do it," he said.

"That becomes a big problem for some of the counties with not much of a tax base."

To help attract future paramedics, the ambulance service recruits in high schools and community colleges, Gross said.

Lexington County is crafting a more aggressive recruitment and retention plan.

County Council Chairman Bruce Rucker said he wasn't aware of the paramedic shortage, but said incentive programs could be considered to fill the positions. "Maybe, it's time we started to look at new recruiting options," he said. "Some counties have scholarship programs and that sort of thing. We should explore that."