

New Ambulances Provide Better Response Times

By Chief Marianne Taylor, Charlotte County Public Safety Director and Fire/EMS Chief

In March of this year, Charlotte County Fire and EMS began an expansion of its services to the community. The addition of two Advanced Life Support (ALS) ambulances has enhanced the service delivery to both the Englewood and south county areas. Identified as Rescue 4 and Rescue 9, these new ambulances are housed at Charlotte County Fire Station 4 at 13600 Marathon Boulevard in Gulf Cove and, in a partnership with the city, at the City of Punta Gorda Fire Station 1 at 1410 Tamiami Trail, respectively.

Adding Rescue 4 and Rescue 9 addresses a steady increase in emergency medical calls. Over the last five years, calls for emergency medical services have increased by nearly 4500 incidents. This increase in call volume impacts response times because ambulances responding outside of their respective areas have a longer distance to travel to reach the scene. Although units are moved strategically to close the gaps and provide the best coverage for the County, the need to add to the fleet was apparent.

We have a policy known as “Condition Red” that was put into place in 2013 to measure the need for additional ambulances. Condition Red helps to identify when emergency medical operations fall to a low county-wide availability of four ambulances or 30 percent capability—it was instituted 99 times in the first 120 days. That translates to an average of 5.8 times per week. The purpose of Condition Red is to establish a standardized approach in facilitating emergency operations during periods of high call volume or extended operations, which are times when resources have become stretched or limited. It remains in effect until we achieve at least 50 percent availability. The reduced availability of emergency medical services for the citizens of Charlotte County was of great concern. Each Condition Red lasts approximately 15 – 30 minutes, during which time any on-duty training exercises are suspended and units remain in service and ready to respond. Ambulances are immediately available and advise dispatch from what location they are responding. This allows for the closest unit to answer the call.

Former Fire Chief DiDio provided a presentation to the Board of County Commissioners recommending adding this new equipment and the additional staffing. Recognizing the positive safety impacts to the community, the Commission took a very proactive approach by immediately funding the vehicles through CIP (Capital Improvement Project) funds. Rescue 4 and Rescue 9 have had significant positive effects on response times, coverage, fuel consumption and wear-and-tear on apparatus that otherwise would be responding out of their areas to answer the calls for help. In addition, these rescues now have the ability to shift to other areas to assist in times of peak call volume.

The cost of each ambulance, including the stretcher, was \$234,047. Of that, impact fees contributed \$60,000 and the remainder came from ad valorem. Additional dollars are spent for medical supplies and equipment.

Prior to the approval for the two additional ambulances, Charlotte County Fire and EMS serviced the almost 700 square miles of Charlotte County including the City of Punta Gorda and the Englewood area with only eleven ambulances. Those ambulances responded to 20,000 emergency calls in 2013. Since its inception on Feb. 14 of this year, Rescue 4 has responded to 900 calls for service. On March 12, Rescue 9 was placed into service and has since responded to nearly 1200 incidents. Charlotte County

Fire and EMS continues to research ways to effectively and efficiently provide the citizens of Charlotte County with the highest quality of emergency medical services.