Acadian Ambulance Service officials said this week the company is adding a third helicopter to its service in the southwest Louisiana area, and will allow for air ambulance service throughout southeast Louisiana, with helicopters based in the Capitol City, Lafayette and Broussard.

The addition of a third helicopter, according to officials, is made possible through the cooperation of Baton Rouge's major hospitals. "The cost of acquiring, configuring and operating an air ambulance helicopter is significant," said Acadian official Richard Zuschlag. "At this initial stage of our service to East Baton Rouge Parish, it would, in fact, have been prohibitive."

"However, the community has the good fortune to be served by hospitals that not only provide the health and safety of the people of the area, because of this concern, Baton Rouge General Medical Center, Medical Center of Baton Rouge and Our Lady of the Lake Regional Medical Center have joined together to underwrite the cost of this additional service.

"Considering the highly competitive nature of the health care industry today, I feel that this spirit of cooperation and concern is a striking indication of the people of the Baton Rouge area that these hospitals are truly dedicated to their overall health and safety."

Zuschlag said the helicopter, a specially-configured twin-engine Bolkow 105, will be based in Acadian's Lafayette branch office and will be operated and maintained by Peachtree Helicopter Inc. The world's largest manufacturer of the Bolkow 105, joined with the latest technology employed in adapting it for ambulance use was developed by FAA and Acadian Ambulance when the Air Med Program began in Lafayette. The air ambulance will be manned by Acadian Paramedics. Major feature of the three crafts in the Air Med Program is a remarkable communications capability. With the FlexCom communication radios, an electronic advance-creation device, the operator can transmit messages to communicate with virtually any individual or organization on frequencies from 25 megahertz to 60 megahertz. This is an invaluable aid in times of emergency.

The craft will have immediate radio contact with State Police trooper headquarters in the Baton Rouge area, as it does in the Lafayette and New Orleans areas. In the event of an emergency, Acadian's 24-hour control center will coordinate with the various hospitals and emergency services to assure the patient is picked up in the shortest time possible.

"We feel the Air Med ambulance-helicopter will play a very significant role in providing greater safety on the major thoroughfares serving Baton Rouge," Zuschlag said. "Also, with the huge industrial complexes along the river, this kind of immediate response is highly desirable."

Zuschlag said that the three helicopters, strategically located from the New Orleans area through the Lafayette area, become a significant force in times of major disaster in any part of south Louisiana. The enhanced response time and increased speed of transport will also further develop the position of Baton Rouge as the regional medical center for this part of the state," he said.

Emergency helicopter service will be a part of the membership program in the ambulance service, according to the Zuschlag. While the average helicopter call costs from $260 to $370, this service will be available to Acadian members for $200 as part of their $45 annual membership fee.

"Zuschlag said use of the helicopter when needed in an emergency will not be restricted to members. "No one will be turned down," he said. "Also, it is important that the community understand that the underwriting of this program by the hospitals involved places no restriction on choice of medical facility. We adhere to a policy of transporting patients to the hospitals of their choice," he said.

With the financial contribution of the hospitals to the operation of the air ambulance, the hospitals will oversee the quality of service. A Physician Advisory Council, comprising the directors of the emergency rooms at the three hospitals, will provide consultation, review and supervision for the helicopter models.

The primary service area of the new helicopter ambulance is a forty mile radius of Baton Rouge. In addition, the helicopter would provide emergency response or critical transfers from medical facilities in small communities to the major medical centers in Baton Rouge as anticipated.