Angola paramedics get top ranking in life support field

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Louisiana State Penitentiary paramedics recently received official recognition for their efforts to raise the standard of emergency medical care available to more than 6,000 prisoners, employees and visitors.

The state Department of Health and Hospitals certified the Angola prison's Emergency Medical Services Department as an advanced life support service, the highest level for private or public ambulance operators.

No other Louisiana prison has reached this plateau, according to Steve Erwin, DJH EMS certification manager.

The attempt to gain certification was entirely voluntary on the part of Angola's EMS employees, Erwin added.

A two-day audit completed on Jan. 24 focused on the department's ambulances, equipment, personnel, supplies and training.

The designation ranks Angola's paramedics on a par with those staffing similar operations atVs the Baton Rouge Parish's Emergency Medical Service, said Capt. Le Walker, commander of the Angola unit.

"Everybody's really proud. It took the whole group to do it. We knew we've reached the plateau, and we're as good as anybody else," Walker said.

The 29-member department includes 17 paramedics, two intermediate emergency medical technicians and 10 EMTs, Walker said.

State law allows paramedics to initiate the highest possible level of emergency care outside a hospital, Walker explained.

The personnel must be divided among five shifts to ensure full paramedic ambulance coverage of the penitentiary at all times. If a paramedic leaves the prison en route to a hospital, other paramedics must be available to replace them, Walker said.

Five of the basic EMTs are enrolled in paramedic classes, Walker said.

The unit provides personnel to conduct "sick calls" at Angola's five out-camps and serves as the nucleus of the prison's 50-man fire department, which Walker also heads.

Medics also are attached to the prison's riot control and prisoner chase teams.

Angola's EMS department also serves a mutual-aid response area of 10 miles outside the 18,000-acre prison in cooperation with West Feliciana Parish Hospital's emergency medical service and West Feliciana Parish Fire Protection District 1.

The department responded to 1,800 calls last year, including about 1,500 classified as emergencies and 300 critical-care transfers from Angola's hospital to other state hospitals in Baton Rouge, New Orleans and Shreveport.

Angola paramedics follow "protocols," written procedures for field treatment, approved by the Bi-Parish Medical Society of East and West Feliciana parishes.

Angola has two of the line modular ambulances, three van-type units and a military surplus, four-wheel drive ambulance for access to off-road areas.

The Angola department began working toward certification in 1989. The main obstacles were attracting enough paramedics to staff the ambulances and obtaining advanced lifesaving equipment, Walker said.

"The biggest holdup was not having enough paramedics, but in the last year, we've been able to keep a pretty good staff of 12 to 17. Our ultimate goal is to have all 29 as paramedics," Walker said.

"It's taken a couple of years of budget adjustments to get all the equipment I needed, but the budget really kicked in during the last year," he added.

The unit is supervised by Angola hospital Administrator Ella Fletcher, Medical Director Dr. Edmundo Gutierrez and Assistant Warden Gary Frank.