Med Express helicopter takes wing this weekend

BERNARD CHIAROT

ARVIDSVILLE: It took nearly six months, but Med Express Ambulance Service is now set to begin Saturday its long-anticipated helicopter service to Vermilion, Berlin and St. Landry parishes.

Med Express took over sole ambulance responsibility here Sept. 7 after Acadian Ambulance could not convince police jurors to bid out the service. Acadian left the parish after 27 years. The lack of helicopter ambulance service since September has been a serious health care concern for residents.

"Even though we were pushed into it and it took us awhile, we're happy it turned out this way because we did it right instead of rushing into it under pressure," Med Express President Mark Majors said jurors this week. "We plan to thank you, Vermilion Parish, right on the side of the aircraft."

Majors said the medically rigged helicopter from South West Helicopters of Tucson, Ariz., which has extensive experience in Acadiana, will have both a paramedic and a registered nurse on board.

"Med Flight brings a whole new level of critical patient air transport not only in Acadiana, but to the state," Majors said. "This level of care wasn't available before. We're the only ones in the state doing it.

The helicopter will be based at Omni Energy Services Corp. in Carencro. The lease also will be developed as the operation grows for Med Express in Lafourche Parish.

The company is licensed in the parish, but may do pickups or dropoffs just as both ends of the trip aren't in Lafourche Parish. Acadiana's base.

Majors also took some mild heat from a handful of residents at the tryout meeting this week. Paul Dubose said he was unhappy with the frequency between Dubose Road and Dobrin Road. He also said he wants to be brought to the hospital of his choice, not the closest hospital, as set by parish medical guidelines.

Buse and Vernon Doucet of the Indian Baton Volunteer Fire Department also complained about some medics' attitudes, work ethic and sense of direction, while John Huguet cited rising transport costs.

"My father was charged $668 for a transport in November and more than $800 for an identical trip after the first of the year," Huguet said.

Majors said Medicare changes were adopted Jan. 1. "It's a new national framework that all ambulance companies have to use."

He said medics now will have to ensure that patients who want a specific hospital. "We're calling it the Paul Dubose waiver form," Majors said, costing a grant from Dubose.

Majors said he believes in standing up for his medics and fair treatment, but would personally take steps to address and correct any rude or otherwise unprofessional behavior.

Jesse Luther "Buster" Hensley III asked Majors why an ambulance is stationed in Maurice, near Lafourche Parish Line, instead of in Grand Chenier to serve a larger expanse of eastern Vermilion Parish. Other ambulances are based in Abbeville and Kaplan.

"It would be easier to replace an ambulance out of a call in Abbeville or Kaplan from Maurice than from Grand Chenier, but we are looking at that some now," Majors said. "We have to look at the transportation distances in the parish, as our service points out. You didn't have that before.

He said the company has answered about 1,000 calls since September, or more than 26 a day on average, compared with the 12 calls a day cited by Acadian as the reason the parish allegedly wasn't busy enough for two ambulance services.

Acadian Ambulance officials, including president Richard Zschokke, chief operating officer David Freese, medical operations director Errol Schmuck and public relations spokesman Keith Simon, did not wish to comment on issues raised by Majors "because we're no longer in Vermilion Parish. Simon said.

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