Ambulance service now covers parish

By TIM TALLEY
River Parishes bureau

CONVENT — St. James Parish's more
than 20,000 residents became members of
Louisiana's largest private ambulance
company on New Year's Day, but most of
them still don't know it.

Acadian Ambulance Service, Inc.
inaugurated the new parishwide service
Wednesday under an unusual contract with
the St. James Parish Council in which tax
dollars pay the membership fee of every
parish citizen.

Parish officials said the arrangement is
unprecedented in Louisiana and that it will
permit them to immediately meet a need
for emergency ambulance service which
would have taken years to meet had they
used the tax dollars to finance a parish-
operated service.

"If we had decided to go out on our own,
it would have taken us five years to get
where we are after only five weeks," said
St. James Parish President Paul K. Keller.

"I think this is the best example I've seen
of government and private enterprise
working together to provide ambulance
services," said Richard E. Zeschlag,
secretary-treasurer of the Lafayette-
based ambulance company.

Keller and other parish officials praised
the new ambulance service, which
officially began on Jan. 1. They urged
residents to become familiar with the
ambulance service.

Under a 24-month contract signed by
Keller and Zeschlag on Wednesday, the
parish will pay Acadian $32,800 a month
to provide ambulance services to each
resident of the parish.

In return, Acadian will furnish all of the
emergency services it offers and
transportation to any hospital in the parish
free of charge, said Daniel J. Domingue,
vice president of Acadian.

In addition, St. James Parish residents
are covered if they are involved in medical
emergencies in any of the 14 other south
Louisiana parishes served by Acadian,
according to Zeschlag.

Acadian's toll-free number is 1-800-232-
5532.

Parish residents will be charged $10
for each way for non-emergency transfers to
locations other than a hospital. Residents
transported outside of the parish will be
assessed a mileage fee of $1.25 per mile
from the parish line.

The St. James Parish contract is unique
because it guarantees membership for all
residents without membership fees, which
cost $12 a year for families or individuals.

Zeschlag said similar contracts have
been signed with other rural parishes but
the total cost of the operation has always
been financed partially by membership
fees.

The contractual arrangement with St.
James will take some pressure off of
Acadian's annual membership drive, said
Zeschlag. However, he said every parish
cannot afford to pay the membership fees
of all its residents.

Aside from paying the fees, the parish
council has transferred two van-type
ambulances to Acadian at a cost of
$57,000. Acadian will equip, operate and
maintain the vehicles, said Keller.

The ambulances will be housed at
hospitals in Lutcher and Vacherie in
substations also donated by the parish, said
Keller. The substations cost $23,000, he
said.

The parish also plans to build two
landing pads near the substations for
Acadian's helicopter ambulance service,
but the cost of the pads has not been
determined, said Keller.

All of the money for Acadian's operation
is coming from a portion of the parish's
new 1-cent sales and use tax, said Keller.
The tax ordinance dedicates one-quarter
of its revenues to emergency medical and
derelated services, he said.

Domingue said that, with the addition of
St. James to Acadian's service area, he
hopes to interest officials in nearby
parishes, including St. Charles and St. John
the Baptist, in Acadian's services.