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Mass. planning commission keeps ambulance service from closing

Hilltown Community Ambulance Association in Huntington avoided having to end service to six towns

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Ram Ambulance paramedic McLellan White (left) and EMT Ryan Paro, put away gear in the back of their ambulance after a call.

Don Treeger/The Republican

By Namu Sampath

masslive.com

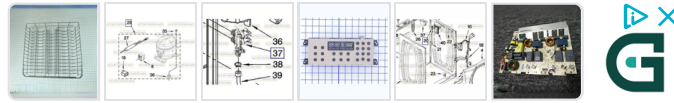
HUNTINGTON, Mass. — An ambulance program serving six rural towns in western Massachusetts almost closed its doors last year due to financial struggles.

The Hilltown Community Ambulance Association was struggling to cover costs and adequately pay its staff. Rather than shut down, the nonprofit reached out to the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission for help.

The association's board president, Mary Ann Pease, asked for advice on its operations. Ira Brezinsky, the commission's point person on the project, is now ready to weigh in.

"We (found) how they've done in the past, how they're doing now, and (gave them) our

recommendations for their successful future,” Brezinsky said. Next month, Brezinsky will present his findings to members of the ambulance association and to town workers.



The ambulance organization serves an area with over 8,000 people in Blandford, Chester, Huntington, Montgomery, Russell and Worthington.

The commission has outlined options for the association to get on a better footing. It could partner with similar organizations in the area or turn the association over to operation by the towns. Alternatively, the association could disband.

The collaboration with the commission, Pease said, will help “us get a better bang for our buck.”

The organization, meantime, may also increase its rates.



For the current fiscal year, Pease said the organization charges the towns \$35.20 per capita. For the next fiscal year, Pease said the association hopes to up that amount to \$50.25 per capita. The added revenue would allow the staff to receive better benefits. And the organization could better handle vehicle repairs and other costly expenses.

The towns also set aside 6% of their annual contributions to help with ambulance replacements. However, because new ambulances often cost up to half a million dollars, the association often opts for used vehicles that it is only able to purchase every five years.

“Rural (emergency medical services) have a lot of heavy lifting to figure out how to make their services work sustainably,” Brezinsky said. “We’re making sure people are paid what they deserve while they’re working long hours on a shoestring budget.”

Need for services



The ambulance organization has solid relationships with other first responders in the area, including local fire departments and state and local police, said Bailey Jones, its director. “We’re open 24 hours a day and seven days a week,” said Jones.

The need for emergency services is growing. Last year, Jones said his staff responded to 811 calls. That number was higher than in the last two years.

Paramedics drive patients to hospitals as far west as Pittsfield or to Pioneer Valley hospitals in Holyoke, Springfield, Westfield and Northampton.

Towns like Russell and Montgomery are roughly 20 minutes from area hospitals. But patients in Worthington can face up to a 45-minute ambulance ride to the closest hospital.

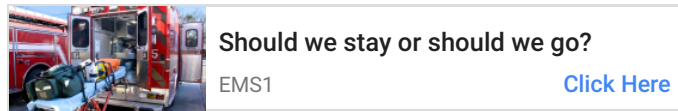
“We do whatever we can to get our patients to the best hospital that will meet their needs,” Jones said.

Mostly, insurance covers ambulance rides. But the association also offers a subscription service to offset the burden of a hefty bill.

“Subscribers pay an annual fee and in exchange, if they use an ambulance, HCAA waives

their out of pocket expenses for the trip,” an insurance document provided by the organization said.

Being a nonprofit, the association is not eligible for certain grants from the state and federal governments, Jones said.



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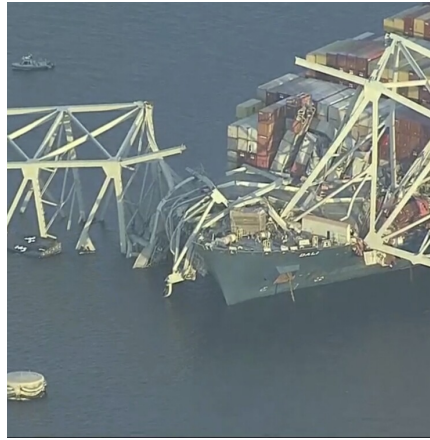


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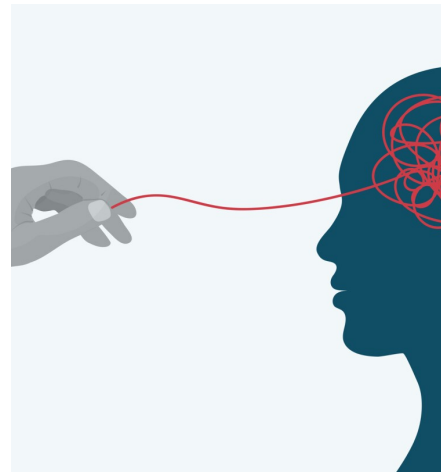
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