

## **Fire Service-Based EMS Success in Rural Iowa**

**By Brian Seymour**

In Warren County, Iowa, fire and emergency medical services were historically provided separately. Fire protection was provided by departments located in communities across the county while EMS was provided centrally under the authority of the Warren County Board of Supervisors. This worked well for many years but over time higher levels of care and quicker response times were needed – particularly in the more remote areas of the county – and the Board struggled to keep up with rising citizen expectations for emergency medical services (EMS) that were being provided out of one central location.

During the 1980s, local fire departments started responding to the increasing demand for better EMS provision by training their personnel to provide basic emergency medical care when they arrived at the scene of an incident ahead of the ambulance. Over time, the fire departments purchased their own ambulances and started to provide medical transport services in addition to basic emergency medical care.

By the mid 1980's, the county discontinued providing EMS because of a lack of funding and an inability to adequately respond in a timely fashion to the increasing number of calls that they were receiving. By this time, the local volunteer fire departments had stepped up and were providing fast, quality care that met the expectations of the citizens. I believe that the change was also well received because it was locals treating and taking care of local people in small communities where for the most part, everyone knew each other.

Warren County had nine fire departments that covered the county in the 1980s and seven of the nine stepped up to provide medical transport services while the other two started providing EMS response and contracting with the next community over to provide medical transport services. This method of providing EMS through local fire departments has stood the test of time and at least in Warren County has proven to be superior to the old way of doing business with one centrally-located county-based EMS system.

It is important to note that when the changeover to fire service-based EMS took place in Warren County, none of the fire departments were out to put the county-based service out of business. As more fire departments came online providing first emergency medical care and then medical transport, citizens started calling the fire department for their EMS because they were reliable and had better response times. With fire stations already strategically located around the county and emergency response personnel in place to respond to calls, the switchover just made sense and took place organically once the fire departments started training and equipping their people to provide EMS.

I think that it is also important to recognize that the county-based EMS system that was in place before the 1980s wasn't a "bad" system; it simply wasn't able to meet increasing citizen expectations without dramatically increasing costs. At the same time, the local fire departments were in place and had everything except for the specialized training and equipment necessary to provide EMS. State grants made it possible to purchase initial emergency medical training for the firefighters and once that had

been attained the local communities came together to pay for ambulances and other necessary equipment to provide medical transport services. The last piece of the puzzle was having fire service leadership that was committed to providing EMS through the fire department and volunteer personnel willing to take on the additional training and emergency response duties. With all of these components in place, the transition to a fire service-based EMS system was successful.

Due to annexation over the years there are now eleven fire departments in Warren County and all but one provides EMS (in one department, West Des Moines, the fire and EMS systems are separated administratively but operate out of the same station and the personnel are cross-trained). Twenty five years ago we needed a better option to provide EMS to our citizens, and fire service-based EMS worked due to the locations of the fire stations, the willingness of the volunteers in each community to train and serve as EMTs and financial help of the state and local governments to assist in providing training.

#### About the Author:

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