

# Casa Grande Dispatch

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The Casa Grande City Council has been asked to consider what it wants to do about ambulance service in the city.

The options would be to attempt to take over the service now provided by Southwest Ambulance, reach some sort of agreement with Southwest for better levels of service, or leave the situation as is.

In general, when a 911 medical call is received, the Fire Department responds with its paramedics and EMTs for initial treatment.

Southwest is then called to take the patient to the hospital, many times with a firefighter on board continuing the emergency treatment. The Fire Department does not have the certificate to transport, unless it's a situation where Southwest is unavailable.

During a presentation to the council, Assistant Fire Chief James Morgan said Southwest now holds the certificate of necessity to provide the

service, stemming from a decision by a City Council years ago to give up the authority and let it the certificate be taken over by a private provider.

"Casa Grande was actually in a unique situation that in the middle '70s they owned that certificate of necessity and chose to give it up, for whatever reason," Morgan said. "In hindsight, that was probably a bad move, because it really takes control away from the public and the public's ability to really dictate their safety net in terms of transportation services.

"So this has been a longstanding issue for this community, not unlike any of the other communities. And that means that sometimes the transportation provider is overwhelmed. When they're overwhelmed, it falls back onto the Fire Department, and how do we transport those patients that need tertiary care to the emergency room or up into the Valley for tertiary care.

"This has been a longstanding problem, transportation services. It is a coordinated effort, if you will, from fire-based EMS. We go out and

we treat the individuals that call 911, but we don't transport.

"That has been an issue that previous councils and the Fire Department have wrestled with for a number of years. That's why we are now bringing this forward to you to talk to you about some of the results and the information with regards to that."

Morgan said one of the main reasons for looking into perhaps attempting to take over the certificate of necessity process was that Southwest "was not meeting their stated performance goals in the certificate of necessity that they told the Department of Health Services that they would meet. In addition to that, they also failed to have an ambulance available at least approximately 20 times per year, and that's been consistent for the last four to five years, looking at past data."

A special committee met between November 2006 and this March to review the situation, Morgan said.

He said the department "coupled that with trying to identify some ways to maybe augment the service delivery aspect, considering that

probably about 76 percent of the job that we do is of an EMS-based nature."

The situation arose in 2003, when the City Council was told that an agreement could be worked out with Southwest where that company would provide an ambulance for service only in Casa Grande, eliminating situations where its units were busy elsewhere and a unit had to be called from as far away as Chandler or Mesa. Fire Chief Scott Miller told the council at the time that the new ambulance would replace the city's aging, malfunctioning unit known as Rescue One and would be housed at Fire Station No. 1 at Florence Boulevard and Florence Street. Southwest would buy the ambulance, Miller said, "and the ambulance attendant driver, which is an EMT, would be a Southwest employee and the paramedic firefighter on the unit would be from the Casa Grande Fire Department, so it is truly a partnership."

That never happened.

"What was transpiring at that time was we were looking at their service levels," present City Manager Jim Thompson said. "We had concerns because of issues like that: never available or en

route or other issues. Southwest at that time to make amends or to, I guess, minimize some of the issues that we were faced with provided a designated unit. They painted it, they did everything, and it was designated unit for Casa Grande. They did it. Was it in written form that this was never to leave the city? No. Southwest stated that that was their intent, but we did not enter into any agreement with Southwest.

"At the time, we were looking at potentially entering into an agreement, but we backed out of it," because of several difficulties, Thompson continued.

"In that draft agreement, there was some other contingencies that they were going to support us in acquiring our own transport unit and some other things. We never actually signed that agreement. The city on their own went out and acquired our own transport unit, which we have."

No one from Southwest management spoke during the presentation of the study to the City Council earlier this month by Morgan and firefighter Phil Emmett.

The Casa Grande department has a contract with Southwest providing for payment to the city when a firefighter, who had given initial emergency treatment, rides in a Southwest ambulance taking a person to the hospital. The department would like to change the financial terms.

"Those reimbursement fees were far below the current market value, so we needed to readdress those and possibly look at recapturing some of those expenses, bringing some of that revenue into the city coffers as opposed to having them go to a private vendor and being disbursed throughout the county as opposed to being centralized here in Casa Grande," Morgan said.

"We're also looking at establishing new policies on accurately capturing data that allows us to report. There is a reporting mechanism through the Department of Health Services in filing complaints at this community, and frankly, a lot of agencies don't understand that you have that capability. Even though you have that capability, the Department of Health Services doesn't do a very good job of investigating or doing anything about it. When you run a

monopoly, if you can't transport with the monopoly provider, who else is going to do it? That becomes a problem."

Morgan said the Fire Department has gathered some data on what it sees as Southwest's inability to consistently meet state requirements.

"Beyond that, though, we have to be able to ensure that there's a public need and that we will not financially impact the provider," he

continued. "And the private providers have done a very good job over the years in establishing their financial base, and even a community

seemingly as small as Casa Grande can have a significant financial impact on a giant corporate provider who has national ambulance contracts.

"I don't know how they do it, but I've attended numerous hearings and they've been successful.

It's very difficult to prove that even a small transportation volume such as Casa Grande's wouldn't financially impact them. It really does benefit the provider that holds the certificate of necessity."

The study presented to the council also had a pitch for better equipment for the Fire Department.

"On our end, we also need to make some changes," Morgan said. "Some of those changes will help us provide better service delivery, such as implementing priority dispatch. Priority dispatch not only effectively improves our EMS system, but the Fire Department operations as well. The Police Department uses this very well in terms of prioritizing calls, for example. A bank robbery in progress would be a Priority One, as an example, and somebody who lost their dog could be Animal Control, the lowest of priorities.

"So anytime we get the 911 call we respond Code 3 (lights and siren, as fast as possible), we subject our personnel to risk, we subject our public to risk and in many cases for nonessential, non life threatening emergencies. It may be an emergency to our customer, but still one that warrants us taking a little extra time and getting there safely."

Morgan said other improvements would be a computer-aided dispatch system and computerized records management. "We don't do that now," he said, "so everything's done

manually and our data is only as good as the input, which becomes problematic."

Morgan said he would also like to see a vehicle locator system that would allow dispatchers to send the closest unit.

Firefighter Emmett said the committee studied several types of vehicles the city could purchase if it wishes to upgrade its emergency response, recommending a four-person light duty unit at a cost of \$214,000 for the vehicle and equipment. The department now has two units that can transport patients when no Southwest unit is available, Emmett said.

In summation, Morgan told the council, "This is just a discussion to get you folks thinking about some alternative delivery methods that would be available to you and the Fire Department in addressing some of the concerns that we're faced with right now, and that's not having enough resources at times, particularly at our peak demands. We've got a 12-hour window, 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. are our busiest hours a day, and during the winter months when our winter visitors show up it really taxes the system.

"We have found, again through data, our auto-aid and mutual aid partners are not always reliable, either, so that's something that we need to think about. Again, implementing a unit like this (four-man) to augment the system, not replace, is a way to address some of these issues that we're having.

"Here's what I believe, this may not be yours: I think that we as the medical safety net for the community should take care of our constituents," Morgan continued. "That's why we provide our paramedics and EMTs on the fire trucks. We should minimize contact, to decrease any anxiety that that patient's going through. Already they're at their worst day at that point, worst event that's going on for them. And we right now in some cases subject them to three interviews: our interview, patient transfer to paramedic and then a transfer at the hospital. "I think that we should control and maintain patient care. There are problems with that. I don't think there's enough time this evening to go into all of those issues, but specifically we should maintain patient control. We're trained better, our paramedics are generally more

seasoned. Not discounting private-provider paramedics, but I don't think that they provide the benefits in terms of training that we do. Many of their individuals do it on their own. The good paramedics that ride those ambulance companies do it on their own, it's not from a corporate philosophy. That's just my opinion." City Manager Thompson told the Casa Grande Dispatch that "the recommendation of city staff at this time is for the council to consider negotiating with Southwest to assure that we have adequate coverage in this town 24/7, and there's lots of ways to achieve that, but that is our goal. If Southwest, since they do control the (license), is going to provide the service, we just want to make sure that it is the best possible service that we could have."