

After taking over Medical Services Inc.

EMS improves emergency service

By MARIAN GREEN
Of the Emerald

Six months ago Medical Services Inc. went bankrupt, and the Eugene and Springfield fire departments have been providing ambulance and paramedic services ever since.

In the past half-year, the two departments have shown they can not only handle the service, but can also improve it.

Virgil Nave, Springfield fire chief, says the fire departments' service "exceeds" emergency service levels provided under MSI.

The cities' emergency service, now called Emergency Medical Services, has cut the average accident response time in half — from eight minutes to a little less than four minutes — says Dick Straw, a former MSI employee. Straw now works as emergency training instructor for the Eugene fire department.

The average cost for an emergency call has also dropped \$100 since EMS started.

Although the cities provide emergency service, it's not tax-supported, says Tim Birr, a Eugene firefighter who also serves as the department's public relations officer.

The size of emergency bills varies, but an average bill is \$203. Straw says. "A cardiac arrest costs a lot more than a broken ankle."

Birr says a contingency plan drawn up when MSI's future began to look shaky helped ease the transition.

The plan outlined procedures for maintaining service levels and took measures to obtain paramedics and equipment should MSI bow out of the emergency service business.

Birr says all firefighters are trained in basic life support methods — whether the department provides emergency service or not — because fire vehicles are often the first to arrive at accident scenes.

The Eugene department arrived at accident scenes before MSI vehicles on about one-third of all emergency calls, Birr says.

"The average fireman does as much CPR (Cardio Pulmonary Resuscitation) as hydrant hook-ups," he says.

The cities' service is in some ways a literal continuation of the MSI service.

About a dozen former MSI employees now work for the Eugene fire department and another seven work for Springfield's fire department.

Eugene's fire department has three fully-equipped emergency vehicles and the Springfield department has two, both of which MSI previously owned.

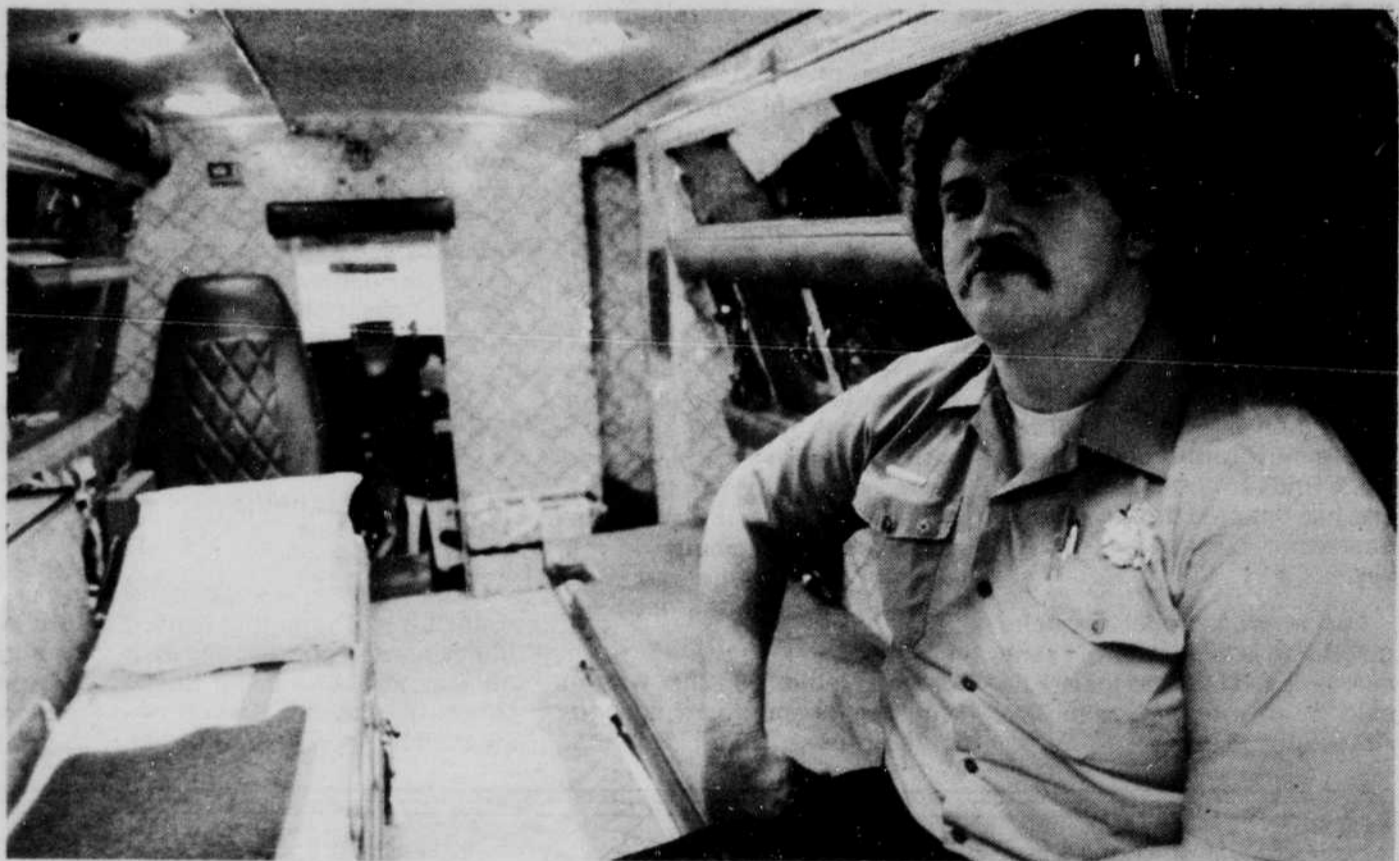


Photo by David Corey

Dick Straw, a former Medical Services Inc. employee, now works for the Eugene Fire Department as an emergency training instructor.

The number of paramedics and emergency vehicles has been unaffected by the change in management, Birr says.

Paramedics benefit from cross-training because their profession has a high burnout rate, Birr says.

"This way they have somewhere to go," he says.

Straw says being employed by the city agrees with him and most former MSI employees.

Fewer hours, increased benefits and more stability make the city a better employer, Straw says.

"Guys know they have a future here," he says.

Straw says that wasn't true at MSI.

"When your company goes into bankruptcy court (like MSI did), you don't know what's going to happen," he says.

Birr says the department has had "no complaints as far as quality," and two significant sectors, the county rural fire departments and the medical community, have expressed confidence in the service.

When the Eugene dispatch office, which now handles all calls for the approximately 50 Lane County fire departments, gets an emergency call from a rural area, it immediately calls the closest rural department, which can then provide interim life support until an emergency medical vehicle arrives, he says.

Birr says doctors, especially those in the Sacred Heart emergency room, have been working closely with the department and have held monthly meetings with the paramedics.

Straw says Sacred Heart has given the fire department's paramedics a "sign of physician confidence" by making two additional drugs available for the treatment of accident victims.

The fire department now gets its medications from Sacred Heart to ensure fresh, standardized medication for accident victims who become hospitalized.

Despite the easy transition, Birr notes one change. "You tend to get up in the middle of the night a lot more."

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