

MCFD1 asking people to reserve 911 calls for life-threatening emergencies



Marion County Fire District No. 1 (MCFD1) is asking people not to call 911 to seek testing for COVID or because they have mild symptoms of illness.

The agency, which serves about 50,000 people in Salem and Keizer, posted a statement Monday from its emergency medical services Chief Mark Bjorklund. Bjorklund said about

half the fire district's patient transports over the past two weeks have been COVID-related and said people should only call 911 for life-threatening emergencies including chest pain, shortness of breath or "any symptom or sign you feel can lead to loss of life or limb."

He said because of the high volume of patients at Salem Hospital and other local hospitals, the agency would

only transport people to an emergency room when necessary.

"I have instructed our personnel to evaluate patients and transport only when necessary. You may be asked to stay home, isolate and call your physician for further direction. If you (are) present with any life-threatening emergencies our staff will transport you immediately and we will never deny transport if another viable agreed-upon solution cannot be found," Bjorklund wrote.

Salem Hospital has seen a consistently high number of patients in its emergency room since March according to Amie Wittenberg, the hospital's director of emergency services. But in recent weeks, she said more of those showing up have COVID-like symptoms.

The number of patients in the

hospital at times means the emergency room has to treat people in the hallway while waiting for beds to open or people to be admitted to other units which are full.

"Unfortunately, we're just kind of running out of rooms as places fill up, beds upstairs," said Dr. Peter Hakim, a Salem Hospital emergency room doctor, on Friday. He said that was the result of many factors, including nursing home staffing shortages preventing patients from being discharged, as well as the COVID surge.

But Hakim said the hospital has space for people who need care and people shouldn't hesitate to come in if they're having a medical emergency.

"We try as often as we can to have people in rooms but we also don't want to delay care. So we'll see people in the hallway as need be," he said.

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