



Fort McDermitt EMS/Contributed Photo

Two paramedics and an advanced paramedic stand with one of Fort McDermitt Tribe EMS Rescue's two ambulances.

Reservation on Oregon-Nevada border fills gap in rescue net

Fort McDermitt Tribe EMS Rescue ready to provide advanced life support in southern Malheur County

By LILIANA FRANKEL
The Enterprise

McDERMITT, Nev. — For the better part of four years, whenever residents of the Fort McDermitt Paiute-Shoshone Reservation in the southern part of Malheur County needed emergency medical service, the ambulance would arrive from Winnemucca — about 74 miles away.

"I think I got COVID back in January," said Ron Eagle Johnny, a member and former chairman of the tribe. "I couldn't breathe. And when the ambulance came for me, it billed me about \$10,000."

But costs have gone down dramatically since June 2020,

when Johnny inaugurated the Fort McDermitt Tribe EMS Rescue, based out of the reservation. The service is government-funded and not-for-profit, and doesn't discriminate between native and non-native patients. Anyone living in the Jordan Valley area of Malheur County also is eligible to receive aid.

"We wouldn't mind going all the way to Burns Junction or farther if they needed the service," said Johnny, who is the EMS rescue chief.

Fort McDermitt Tribe EMS Rescue operates two fully equipped pickup trucks and two ambulances and has a staff of 10, including Johnny. Among the staff members are three paramedics, an emergency medical services registered nurse, an emergency medical responder and four advanced emergency medical technicians.

Before the 2000s, nurse practitioner Rodney Burrows was the main source of

emergency transport on the reservation at Fort McDermitt. He was known for getting a patient in his van, provided by Indian Health Services, and driving to meet any ambulance coming out from Winnemucca, Johnny said.

Then, according to

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Johnny, in 2003, the federal government recognized its responsibility to the Paiute-Shoshone people to provide emergency medical services. For the first time, the tribe had an ambulance service at its own disposition.

But in 2016, the federal government announced at a hearing in Washington, D.C.,

that it would be withdrawing funding from Indian Health Service facilities at Fort McDermitt, including both the small medical clinic and the ambulance service, said Johnny.

The Paiute-Shoshone subsequently won a court filing that restored funding.

"All we want to do is provide excellent emergency medical care to those that live on or near the reservation," Johnny said.

Since June 2020, Johnny and his colleagues have been doing just that, in both Malheur County and in Humboldt County in Nevada. The Paiute-Shoshone reservation straddles the state line, and

U.S. Highway 95 runs right through their area of coverage. According to Johnny, rollovers of trucks and other vehicles are the most common accidents the service attends.

"The main culprit is an overweight trailer and a vehicle that is too light to tow it," said Johnny.

The Fort McDermitt Tribe EMS Rescue charges only the mandatory minimum fees to those using the service — a base rate between \$600 and \$800 depending on the service required, plus \$20 per mile traveled in the ambulance.

According to Johnny, his service has a mutual aid agreement with Jordan Valley Ambulance Service to report to the scene of accidents when they are closer to the reservation. Representatives of Jordan Valley Ambulance Service couldn't be reached for comment.

Lt. Rich Harriman, of the Emergency Management office of Malheur County,

confirmed the county is working with Johnny to establish shared use of the county dispatch service. A Malheur County Court resolution, delayed by COVID, is in the works.

The advanced life support system that Johnny's team operates, which is the most advanced in the area, "could help us out a great deal," said Harriman. "Especially in that Highway 95 corridor where we have so many crashes and wrecks."

Johnny takes pride that the Fort McDermitt Tribe EMS Rescue offers such a high level of service — a notch above what was previously offered by the Indian Health Service. His service has recently taken to doing public events, like a Halloween trunk-or-treat, to connect with the community.

"Our people have been here for thousands of years," he said. "We're not going anywhere. And now our ambulance service is here too."

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