

ECONOMY

Challenges EMS

Fallout from the deepening recession has created a myriad of new challenges for EMS agencies nationwide. Although most communities try to minimize the fiscal impact on public safety while tightening their belts, most EMS and fire departments are still taking a hit. For instance, Philadelphia, where the fire department provides the city's 9-1-1 transports, has proposed closing seven fire companies. Firefighters in Vancouver, Wash., recently approved a pay freeze to help save the cash-strapped city more than \$700,000. And the Collier County (Fla.) EMS Department has postponed replacing three ambulances and may reduce the number of units it fields.

"There are cuts occurring in public safety all across the country," says Gary Ludwig, deputy fire chief for the Memphis Fire Department and chair of the International Association of Fire Chiefs' EMS Section.

Job losses often mean the loss of health insurance, and many uninsured people use emergency departments (EDs) as their source of primary care. "They can't go to a doctor or a physician's office, so 9-1-1 is their introduction to the health-care system," says Ludwig.

Many uninsured patients don't have the money to pay for ambulance transportation, adding additional economic burdens for EMS providers. "Collections are going to be a problem," says

American Ambulance Association President Jim Finger, chief executive administrator for Regional Ambulance Service in Rutland, Vt., "so we're going to have to try harder to collect and make sure that those who can pay are paying.

"The main thing we have to do is protect the Medicare income we have today and try to build on that," Finger says. The AAA will introduce new legislation in Congress this year in hopes of keeping Medicare reimbursement steady and increasing future reimbursement.

The need to replace ambulances and equipment has also become a challenge. "People have to ask how they can make their equipment last longer, and they need to take care of the equipment they have," Finger says. In Memphis, the addition of two new ambulances will have to wait. "I'm going to maintain where I'm at, but I'm not going to be able to add," says Ludwig.

Memphis has also seen house fires double as desperate homeowners—many facing foreclosure—set their properties on fire in hopes of collecting insurance money.

"Once homes are vacant, there's an opportunity for vagrants and kids to get in and do vandalism," says Ludwig. "More homeless people squat in [abandoned homes] and use alternative heating sources, which also creates the opportunity for fire."

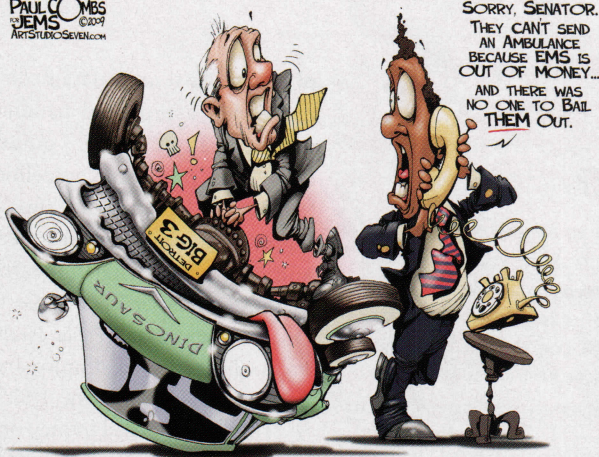
SEEKING OPPORTUNITIES

Although the current environment poses numerous challenges, it also creates new opportunities. Budget shortfalls require public safety and

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EMS departments to look for alternative revenue opportunities like never before. “Everyone thinks cut, cut, cut,” Ludwig says, “but before you cut, you need to look for additional sources of revenue and [opportunities to] achieve efficiencies.”

To generate needed money, some public-sector services are adding interfacility transport to their menu, and firefighters are giving flu shots. Ludwig’s department has started charging \$100 to attorneys who request patient medical records.

Technology is also opening new opportunities for efficiency. Communities are increasingly using software or the Internet to reduce ambulance diversion and long ED waits to minimize the number of ambulances needed. In Seattle/King County, Wash., emergency dispatchers and EMS providers can access a new Web-based software system, KCHHealthTrac, to check ED capacity before deciding where to route ambulances. “It has definitely improved our efficiencies,” says Allison Schletzbaum, healthcare resource and information manager for King County Health Care Coalition.

“With some creative thinking, patience and teamwork, we can weather this economic storm and come out stronger in the process,” says Finger. “America is a great country, and our businesses and citizens are always trying to make things better,” he says. “I think we will eventually come through this with things being just fine.” —Cynthia Kincaid