

Responding to city's calls for more help

By Lauren Fritsky
Times Staff Writer

It's no secret that the city's emergency medical services system remains strained.

Some attribute the causes to ambulance shortages and overworked medics, but most agree on the effects — long response times, and sometimes tragedy, if a person dies while waiting for help.

That's why Burholme Emergency Medical Services, located at 830 Bleigh Street, takes matters into its own hands to ensure that every caller gets the first aid

and emergency transportation they need.

The non-profit group, which is home to Medic 96, officially joined forces with Northeast Community Ambulance, based at 4411 Rhawn St., in 2003.

"We thought that we could do it better together," said Tim Hinchcliff, managing director for Burholme, which began nearly 75 years ago. Robert Berkoff is the administrator for the ambulance group, which began as a water-rescue entity in 1947.

Together, the groups handle about 6,000 calls on both sides of Roosevelt

Boulevard and stick to the national standard of eight minutes for response time. Group officials know of no other EMS unit and ambulance company in the city that works together like they do.

The Philadelphia Fire Department employs 59 engine companies and 29 ladder companies, all of which are staffed with at least one emergency medical technician who is trained at the basic level, according to the department's Web site. The city uses about 40 ambulances, a smaller number than other metropolitan areas of similar sizes.

Hinchcliff said that areas like the Northeast that have less violent crime often see ambulances and locally based medic units sent to respond to calls in other parts of the city. Hinchcliff believes that the city can help stop the shortage by adding non-municipal services to the present system.

"A significant problem is the city not having an integrated system," Hinchcliff said.

The Burholme EMS-Community Ambulance partnership actually doubles
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the chance that callers will get timely service, Hinchcliff says.

It operates on a dual-response system for which dispatchers can send out personnel and vehicles from each group and transfer calls to one another. That means one or more of the 50 medics that service either group will respond to a call.

The system was a lifesaver for one recent caller — the groups dual-responded to a woman who had gone into cardiac arrest.

"Having all the personnel there aided in her resuscitation," Hinchcliff said.

As with city emergency services, 80 percent of the calls the non-profits receive are for basic medical needs, while the remaining percentage deal with advanced care situations. Many of the groups' subscribers are elderly folks.

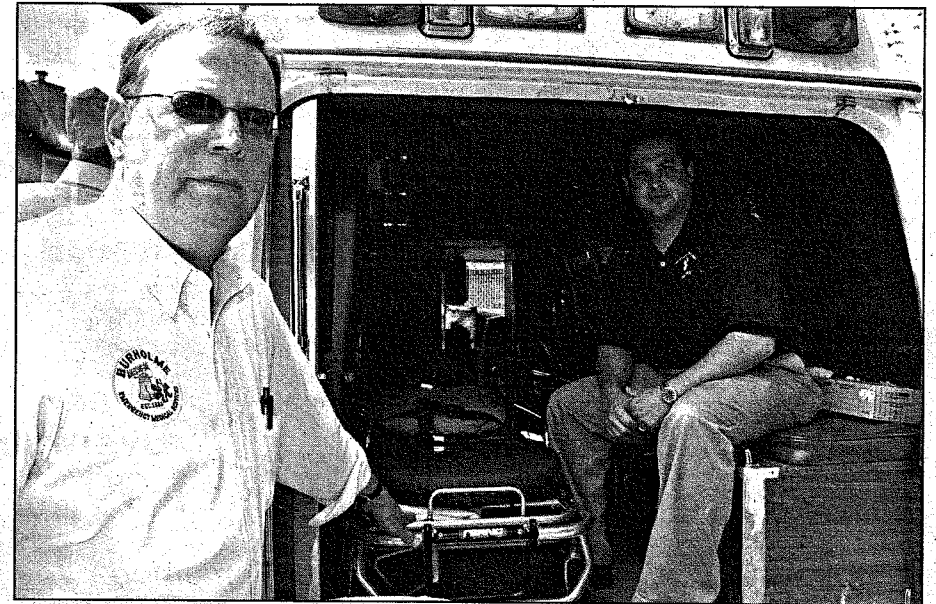
Burholme has four Advanced Life Support (ALS) vehicles, one ALS responder unit and one Invalid Coach Van (SSV). Community Ambulance adds two Basic Life Support (BLS) ambulances and two wheelchair-lift vans to the mix.

And the personnel that do the actual lifesaving are top-notch professionals, according to Hinchcliff and Berkoff, both of whom are Northeast natives and former volunteer medics. Neither group holds recruitment drives.

"We're very picky about who we hire," Hinchcliff said. "A lot of the public take it for granted. It's a demanding job."

The two groups continue to keep their billing and bookkeeping separate, though they keep the lines of communication between the offices open.

Neither man rules out a complete merger in the future, but say that, for now, they enjoy maintaining a



JENNY SWIGODA / TIMES PHOTO
Burholme EMS managing director Tim Hinchcliff (left) and Northeast Community Ambulance administrator Robert Berkoff.

presence in their respective sections of the Northeast.

"It's been a great partnership because it includes our coverage areas," Berkoff said. ••

For more information about Burholme EMS, call 215-725-4030 (non-emergency line) or visit www.burholme.org.

For information on Northeast Community Ambulance, call 215-624-9111.

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Northeast Times 5-31-07