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Life Flight expands service

Air ambulance provider adds base in Sandpoint

Competition among medical helicopter companies continues to sharpen across the Inland Northwest as Life Flight Network opens its second northern Idaho base in two years – a region that for two decades has been served by Spokane-based Northwest MedStar.

The expansion by Life Flight into Sandpoint is a multimillion-dollar venture for the Oregon air-ambulance service. It will station one helicopter and one airplane in Sandpoint and employ 14 people, including nurses, paramedics, pilots and mechanics.

The company opened a base in Lewiston last year that has been busy, said Holly Love, Life Flight's director of customer service. The expansion is vexing for MedStar, which completed a needs assessment for the region and determined that Idaho was appropriately served, said executive director Eveline Bisson.

MedStar averaged one flight every 1.5 days in North Idaho. Bisson said the region does not need another air-ambulance provider, calling it an expensive duplication of services. Love, however, said Life Flight was contacted by medical, business and political leaders in several communities who wanted a different approach to emergency response.

Life Flight has a policy of stationing its helicopters in rural communities where they can quickly respond to emergencies such as car accidents in remote locations and then whisk injured people to an appropriate hospital, including the big medical centers in Spokane, Love said.

MedStar, in contrast, maintains its fleet in the cities of Spokane, Moses Lake and Richland, Love said. "It's a difference in approach," Love said. "We did our own research and decided that the communities that approached us were indeed underserved. "This is a big decision. It's not something we undertook lightly in the hopes that the business will be there."

Life Flight, she said, would serve residents across the region, including all of North Idaho, parts of Northwest Montana and northeast and north-central Washington. Life Flight aircraft are painted blue with white and blue lettering.

MedStar aircraft are yellow, blue and white. Bisson said MedStar would not retreat from providing emergency air-ambulance services in the region. Both helicopter ambulance companies are operated as nonprofits and governed by boards where some members are appointed by Providence Health and Services, the large Catholic hospital system that runs hospitals across the region and down the West Coast.

Love said Providence appointees to the Life Flight board abstained from voting for the expansion into Sandpoint, noting a possible conflict of interest. MedStar is run by Inland Northwest Health Services, based in Spokane. INHS also owns St. Luke's Rehabilitation Hospital and has carved out a niche in establishing an electronic medical records network linking many hospitals and doctors.

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Helicopter service was among the reasons INHS was founded in the mid-1990s. At the time, Spokane's two competing hospital systems each had their own helicopter emergency service. When that arrangement proved too costly, INHS was created to ease the financial burden of providing such a service.

Since then, INHS has severed its governance relationship with Deaconess Hospital. It is now overseen by a board where the majority of members are appointed by Providence. Today, MedStar earns enough money to pay for itself and contribute to the overall nonprofit mission of INHS.