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New hospital allows paramedics to spirit patients to quicker care

You've been working for 18 hours when the break finally comes — time to check gear, re-stock supplies, grab a snack. Then there's the call — a single-vehicle rollover on Interstate 84 near Wendell. The driver, not wearing his seat belt, was thrown from his car. He's alive, but won't be for long if his battered body keeps bleeding into itself.



An Air St. Luke's helicopter piloted by Moen hovers over the landing pad at the new hospital in Twin Falls on May 21, after a flight for local media. The new St. Luke's Magic Valley Medical Center air ambulance landing pads were raised to provide more clearance from nearby power poles and structures.

You're a paramedic, and in the frantic minutes to come, your life will be an intense race against the clock. Whether you're screaming across the blacktop in the back of an ambulance or high above the Magic Valley in a helicopter, every second counts when your patient is in critical condition. Conflicting forces of utter exhaustion and the sharp, new hit of adrenaline thrash inside your body as you draw near the hospital. At this moment, the last thing you want to see is somebody's Camry blocking the emergency room entrance.

Congestion at the old Twin Falls hospital's emergency room entrance raised paramedics' ire — and blood pressure — as ambulances and other vehicles jockeyed for position, pinned between the brown brick building and the cordoned-off slab of parking lot that operated as an emergency helicopter landing pad.

Although Magic Valley Paramedics Department Manager Gilbert Schmidt couldn't recall a specific incident that an ER traffic jam became a problem, he said it wasn't uncommon for one or two ambulances to arrive at the old ER, only to see another in its lone ambulance parking spot.

"We just had the one place for the ambulance," Schmidt said. "Someone would have to move. Then we had to work around family members who were picking up patients."

That problem was one of many gripes with the old St. Luke's Magic Valley Medical Center that hospital officials addressed in planning their new \$238 million Twin Falls facility, which accepted its first patients on May 21.

The new hospital features separate emergency delivery areas for paramedics and the general public, and the ambulance bay has room to dock seven trucks at once. The separation of ambulance and walk-in patient parking is crucial, as Magic Valley Paramedics are dispatched about a dozen times per day.

Across the parking lot from the ambulance bay are two raised helipads for the Air St. Luke's helicopters that bring in some of the most gravely ill and injured patients the new hospital will receive. An elevator from the main helipad brings patients and paramedics to ground level, where a path that can be heated to keep it ice-free in the winter leads directly to the emergency room's trauma area.

Once inside, flight paramedics will also have extra room to continue their work before completely handing a patient's care to hospital staff.

"We go into the ER, give a report to the staff and continue to monitor patients until they're fully in the care of hospital staff," said Karen Sheppard, who has worked one year as a flight registered nurse.

The new ER's 25 rooms are double that of the old hospital, which helps paramedics get in and out quicker. Schmidt said it was common to see patients waiting in the hallway at the old ER.

Flight paramedics and pilots also received new living quarters located barely a football field's length from the helipad and ER, as they work 24-hour shifts.

While the new hospital has brought a slew of changes for Magic Valley emergency medical responders, Air St. Luke's biggest change is yet to come. St. Luke's Health System's Twin Falls and Meridian locations will soon upgrade their helicopters to Bell 429 models leased from Boise-based Idaho Helicopters Inc.

Flight paramedic Blaine Patterson said the Bell 429's shortened start-up time than the current Bell 430s Air St. Luke's operates can cut liftoff time in half, to about four minutes.

"Starting the chopper is the longest part," Patterson said. That time is especially vital now, as Patterson said the summer is usually Air St. Luke's busiest season. In an emergency situation that crops up after people take to the outdoors for horseback riding or trail riding with ATVs, a helicopter can get to places an ambulance can't.

Another advantage over the current Bell 430 model is that the new helicopter is a rear-loading model that can accommodate a full-size stretcher. "Having our own stretcher saves time because right now we're transferring patients from our stretcher to a hospital stretcher," Sheppard said. "For critical patients, one less move makes a big difference."