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New ambulance brings new service

Air St. Luke's to take on most interfacility transports

Increasingly stressed valley fire departments will no longer provide most transfers from St. Luke's Wood River Medical Center to other facilities, due to Air St. Luke's newly placed private ambulance.

Beginning Nov. 1, patients needing a higher level of care provided at St. Luke's in Twin Falls or Boise will be transported using an ambulance provided by Air St. Luke's, said Public Relations Coordinator Jenny King. She said the service will provide ground transfers between Twin Falls and Boise, as well as transfers to St. Alphonsus and Blaine Manor.

St. Luke's employee Eric Demment prepares the new Air St. Luke's ambulance for service on Wednesday.



"Any [Air St. Luke's] helicopter or ground transport will take patients wherever the doctor recommends or the patient requests," she said.

The ambulance now based near the emergency room at St. Luke's Wood River was moved up from Ada County following a year of discussions with the Blaine County Ambulance District, Wood River Fire & Rescue and the Ketchum Fire Department.

The departments reported difficulty finding volunteer staff willing to make the eight-hour round trip to Boise and the slightly shorter trip to Twin Falls, and requested that the hospital find some way to assist them.

"In those discussions, it was determined that the best solution going forward was to use the St. Luke's transportation system," said Sharon Kensinger, vice president of nursing and patient care services at St. Luke's Wood River.

Wood River Fire & Rescue Chief Bart Lassman said his preference would have been that the hospital provide funds to further compensate volunteers who undertake the transfers.

"We were trying to increase the amount of money given to people to make the transfer, to sweeten the pot, to provide someone who is on call," Lassman said.

But more money is not always enough. Lassman added that while fire department volunteers are paid a nominal amount to remain on call, those who undertake transfers are generally paid time and a half out of department coffers. Still, the department has trouble finding people to staff the transfers.

Air St. Luke's has hired 11 part-time employees to staff the ambulance, King said. Five of those are paramedics, four of whom were already part-time St. Luke's Wood River employees who added a second position. Of six

Ambulance 1

EMTs, King said, one was already an employee of Air St. Luke's and four were recently hired at St. Luke's Wood River. However, with the limited supply of EMTs and paramedics in the Wood River Valley, some people are concerned that St. Luke's Wood River will draw staff away from the fire departments.

Blaine County Commissioner Angenie McCleary, who is also an Ambulance District commissioner, said Wednesday that she received a letter from a Wood River Fire District commissioner expressing the worry that St. Luke's EMTs and paramedics may also be volunteers with the fire department, and that staffing the transfers will decrease the number of people available for emergency response.

"I am sympathetic of his concern," McCleary said. "I don't know if we have enough people in the community to meet the need."

Lassman said he had one Wood River volunteer and one former volunteer interview for the EMT positions. He said some of his volunteers were already employees with St. Luke's Wood River.

"They haven't stolen anybody," Lassman said. "For a volunteer, we can't control what they do. They are free to go to work [for Air St. Luke's], but they have to advise us."

Ketchum Fire Department Chief Mike Elle did not return a call by press deadline Thursday to determine if Air St. Luke's hired any Ketchum volunteers. King said the new hires who are also with local fire departments will be able to "continue their roles" as volunteers.

Another issue that has arisen with the presence of a private ambulance in the valley is the possibility that Air St. Luke's would bid for the county's ambulance contract. Air St. Luke's is the ambulance service in the Magic Valley and in Pocatello, but Kensinger and Lassman said the likelihood of Air St. Luke's becoming the sole ambulance provider in the valley is nil.

"The question has come up," Kensinger said. "Air St. Luke's is not interested."

Lassman said Wood River Fire & Rescue and Ketchum Ambulance provide much more than ground transportation, including technical rescue and extrication. In addition, he said he expected to be called on as backup in inclement weather.

"We have four-wheel-drive ambulances," he said. "We don't know that they have the vehicles that will get through snow."

If Air St. Luke's were to try for the county's ambulance contract, Lassman said, they would likely be unsuccessful.

"If they wanted to, they could bid for it," he said. "And we'd be right there showing the public that we can provide a much higher level of service for less money."