

by Jack Stout

Fire vs. Private EMS

It Doesn't Have To Be This Way

High noon in Centerville. You can slice slabs off the tension with your Buck knife. Their jobs at stake, fire-fighter paramedics and private paramedics watch their leaders square off down on main street for the final showdown. The fire chief speaks, or maybe it's the private owner, "This here paramedic industry ain't big enough for both of us."

"Oh yeah?" says the other.

"Yeah," says the first. The caliber of their debate hasn't changed in a decade.

The truth is that this industry is big enough for both of them, and if the leaders on both sides can just get their egos under control, everyone, including the patients, will come out a winner.

This month's guest "Interface" article was written by Jerry Carter, chief of the Largo Fire Department, Largo, Florida. The article is about one of the best public service bargains in all of local government – the ALS engine. In service per dollar, ALS engines rival the efficiency of privately operated all-ALS, full service transport systems. The advantages are obvious:

1. Generating the ALS service at low marginal costs, ALS engines are our industry's least expensive means of rapidly delivering paramedic capability to the scene.
2. Use of ALS engines improves the productivity of the entire fire department – not just crews assigned to the rescue units.

Jack Stout has been at the forefront of innovations in the design and implementation of EMS systems for the past dozen years. If you have a question, a problem, or a solution related to the public/private interface in prehospital care, address your letter to "Interface" jems, P.O. Box 1026, Solana Beach, CA 92075.

3. Compared with transport cable rescue rigs, ALS engines decrease the average time spent per call – especially when backed up by a reliable ALS transport system.

4. When a private ALS ambulance and an ALS engine are simultaneously dis-

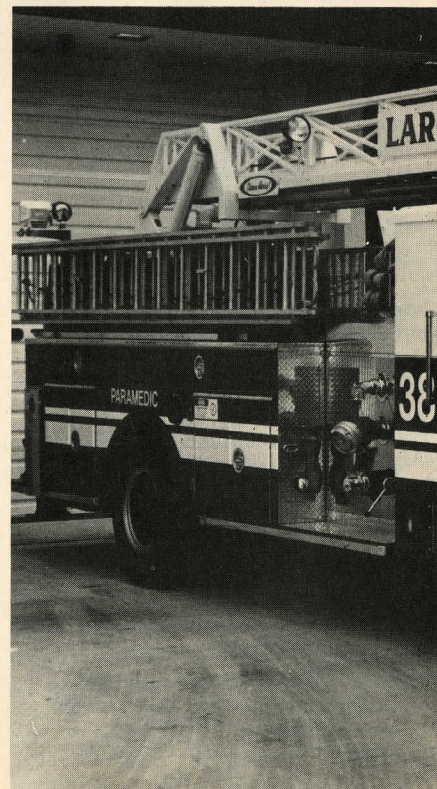
"Someday our industry's leaders may face the fact that there is work a fire department can do best, and work that a qualified private ambulance company can do best."

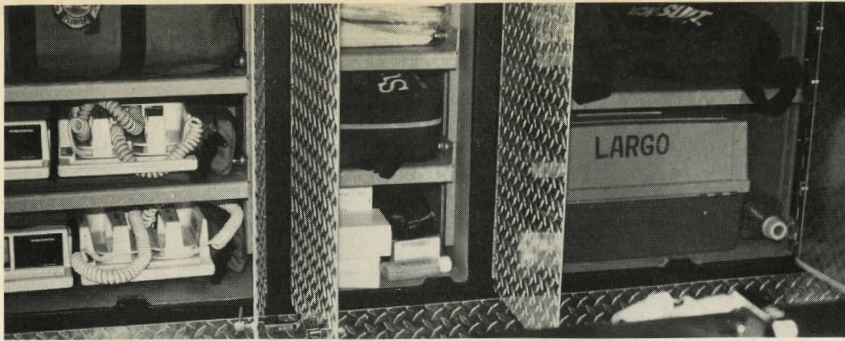
patched to a critical call, the patient gets a second chance if either unit's response is delayed for any reason.

5. Crews working ALS engines are not just cross-trained, they are also cross-utilized, every day.
6. Properly organized, the marginal cost per response of an ALS engine is far less than that of an ALS rescue unit, and only slightly higher than that of a BLS engine.
7. While the private sector can deliver ALS transport service far more efficiently than can a government agency (i.e., by peak load staffing, aggressive system status management, and many

other methods that resist duplication in the public sector), nothing delivers ALS first response less expensively than an ALS engine.

Just as a reliable private ALS transport system is no substitute for a reliable first responder program, a reliable first responder program is no substitute for a reliable ALS transport service. A first-class prehospital care system must have both. The best of both worlds is a prehospital care system combining the performance and efficiency of a privately operated all-ALS,





An ALS engine can make an important contribution to an existing prehospital care system in helping to save lives.

full service system with the equally impressive performance and efficiency of an ALS engine first responder system.

Oh, of course there are problems with working together. But there are also solutions. Who's in charge at the scene? The senior paramedic of the first crew to arrive – who else? When should a fire paramedic ride in with the patient? Whenever the paramedic in charge makes that decision. Continuity of care? Joint in-service training, uniform medical control, uniform on-board equipment, standard medical protocols. Where cooperation is valued, solutions are found. Elsewhere, solutions are impossible.

Someday our industry's leaders may face the fact that there is work a fire department can do best, and work that

a qualified private ambulance company can do best. While some shoot it out in Centerville, others cooperate to produce a better result together than either could produce alone. God bless those others.

ALS Engines Work In Largo, Florida

by Jerry Carter

Among fire chiefs there exist wide differences of opinion regarding the type of coverage and amount of commitment a fire department should give to emergency medical services. Some believe fire departments should staff for

One of Largo Fire Department's ALS engines which provides both fire protection and prehospital care to the community.



the major fires and not use fire suppression resources for other emergencies, which might reduce the likelihood of having fire suppression readily available for the two to three percent of time we use it.

Our city strongly believes that a fire department can safely provide fire protection and play an important role in our community's prehospital care system using the same resources. Our belief in that concept is so strong that today the Largo Fire Department runs advanced life support (ALS) engines exclusively.

In 1983, Largo was running both an engine and a rescue company out of each of our fire stations. This system proved inadequate since all of Largo's engine and truck companies were chronically undermanned. When an engine company arrived on a fire scene, their capabilities were often so severely limited that they were sometimes forced to wait for additional resources before proper firefighting could be implemented.

At the same time, our rescue units were intended to be manned by two paramedics, but not infrequently the rescue units were forced to go on the road with one paramedic and one EMT.

One of the biggest problems associated with the engine and rescue concept was the fact that the majority of the workload was being carried by the rescue crews since over 80 percent of total calls were EMS-related. Given the unequal workload and the low productivity of engine company crews, animosity developed between rescue crews and engine companies. Realizing that a way must be found to equalize workloads and unite our personnel, we began a program to give the citizens of Largo excellent, yet cost-effective EMS and fire services using the same resources.

The solution to the problem was ALS engine companies. In 1985, all of our engine companies became ALS capable. Today, every engine carries a four-man crew, at least two of which are firefighter/paramedics with the remaining crew trained to the EMT level. By staffing in this manner, and by furnishing each unit with two complete sets of ALS equipment, each ALS engine is capable of responding to and handling two ALS calls and one fire suppression call literally back-to-back.

The Largo Fire Department, while in command at all medical emergencies, works closely with the private ambulance companies who transport for us. As ALS first responders, we stabilize the patient, sometimes with the assistance of private ambulance crews, and then the patient is transported by

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private ambulance to the hospital with our paramedics on board, when necessary.

In 1986, the Largo Fire Department responded to over 10,000 calls for service. Almost 85 percent of those calls were medical requests. The nature of our population plays a vital role in determining these statistics, as many senior citizens have chosen our Florida climate for their retirement years.

As the figures illustrate, ALS engines have proven extremely cost-effective for our community, saving us about a million dollars each year in manpower costs alone. Costs of fuel, maintenance and depreciation are about the same for both our rescue units and engines, but because we no longer need to purchase and replace rescue units, our overall savings are substantial. Perhaps more importantly, our capacity for handling demand fluctuations is greater than before, our personnel workloads are more fairly distributed, and our manpower productivity is something we don't mind discussing with our elected officials.

Of course, there is still the possibility that a fire with property loss may someday occur due to insufficient firefighting capability at the same time an engine is providing medical services in another location, just as it is possible that we may experience a delayed EMS response because our engines are tied up at a fire. To minimize these possibilities and their consequences, we are now in the process of upgrading our private transport service to the paramedic level – an improvement that will also help us rest easier when we elect not to accompany our "BLS" patients to the hospital. But even accepting this possibility of conflicting demands on our resources, we believe the lifesaving advantages of our system far outweigh the property loss that could occur.

A Word Of Warning: A reliable ALS transport service run by a qualified firm is essential to the safe utilization of ALS engines. Transport unit response times must be extremely reliable (i.e., not more than 10 minutes maximum with not less than 90 percent reliability), clinical standards and quality control must be uniform, and the contract or franchise must incorporate adequate safeguards against service interruption as well as effective takeover provisions. □

What To Do When A Unit Is Overworked

Question: So you've got a station where your rescue unit runs so frequently that if you did use an ALS engine it would almost never be available for fire suppression. Is your rescue unit justified in that situation?

Answer: Maybe not, consider the following:

1. If your city's transport service is unreliable or operates at the BLS level, chances are your rescue unit is spending much more time per call than necessary. How much time you're spending per call is just as important as how many calls you're running.
2. Even where call loads are heavy, they're almost never heavy 168 hours of the week. With the money you're spending operating a rescue unit, you can buy additional peak load coverage from your private ALS transport company and still have

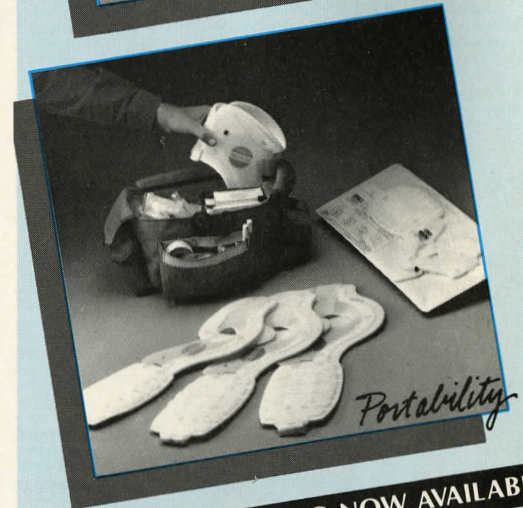
enough left over to fund the marginal costs of one or two more ALS engines. The result: for the same money, more peak load EMS coverage than before and added fire protection.

3. If you're accustomed to living with unreliable transport service, chances are you've gotten into the habit of responding to every 9-1-1 call. If your call loads are modest, there's nothing wrong with responding on every EMS call. But if your EMS workload is too high for ALS engines, the solution is to fix your transport system so you can employ a version of Dr. Jeff Clawson's proven priority dispatching methods (see "Priority Dispatching" series in *JEMS*, beginning with the June 1986 issue). With a reliable ALS transport service and good priority dispatching, you can safely cut your EMS runs by 50 percent or more. – Jack Stout □

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