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Firm owner says he could save Fire Department money

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A private ambulance service in North Powder believes it can save the Baker City Fire Department money by transporting patients to Boise hospitals in non-emergency situations.

Med Transport is a licensed ambulance service that was added to the Baker County's ambulance service area agreement with Baker City in June 2016.

The service agreement allows Med Transport to transport patients when the Baker City Fire Department, which handles fires as well as ambulance calls, doesn't have a crew available. An example would be when the city's two ambulances crews are responding to emergency calls at the same time. The agreement stipulates that the city has the first right of refusal for non-emergency transports.

Med Transport owner Chris Arvidson contends the fire department is not calling on his company as often as it could.

Arvidson cited Baker City Fire Chief Tom Wills' recent statements that the department is understaffed, which is the reason he has applied for a federal grant that would pay part of the cost to hire three employees for three years.

Wills said last month that "our on-duty paramedics can be unavailable for up to six to 12 hours a day depending how they are servicing (rural areas) or if they are taking patients back and forth to Boise. Sometimes we do that two to three times a day."

Wills said this week that multiple runs in a single day is a rare event. In 2015 the department handled 55 out-of-town patient transfers, and in 2016 there were 61 such transfers. The latter number represents 3 percent of the fire department's call volume.

Wills, who was hired last fall, said he mentioned having multiple out-of-town transfers in a single day to illustrate a situation that could leave his department understaffed.

“Those interfacility transfers as part of our operation — in the relative scheme of everything we do — is a relatively small part of our day to day operations,” Wills said. “(Since) I've been here when we've done two in one day but then we'll go a week, week and a half or two weeks where we won't do any.”

Arvidson argues that Wills' statistics bolster his contention that Baker City could partially alleviate its staffing shortages by calling Med Transport more often for non-emergency transfers.

“The Baker Fire Department knows our service is available,” Arvidson said. “If I take (non-emergency) transports, that lessens the risk of first response delays.”

Arvidson said his company has handled 42 patient transports for the Baker City Fire Department.

Wills said the city will continue to utilize Med Transport when needed, and that he appreciates having that option.

“If it's in the middle of the night...and our crews have been super super busy, I don't feel comfortable having them — after they've been up all day and all night — do a six-hour transfer to Boise,” Wills said.

His goal of increasing staffing — whether through the federal grant or other means — is based on the department's call volume increasing at a rate of 3.2 percent annually. He emphasized that the goal is to continue to be able to provide emergency service and other services the department provides as the need grows.

“If I don’t try and increase staffing, it’ll be more difficult to manage that increase,” Wills said.

Arvidson, though, insists that the city isn’t using his company as often as it could.

“Why are they trying to take all these transports when there’s someone already here?” he asked.

Wills disagrees.

“There’s no hidden agenda,” he said.

See more in the March 10, 2017, issue of the Baker City Herald.