

## ***Rochester Democrat and Chronicle***

### **RIT Ambulance Answers the Call**

Chris Swingle • staff writer • March 21, 2011

Staff, students or visitors who suffer a significant injury or medical emergency at Rochester Institute of Technology are often surprised to see college students respond.

Around their classes and coursework, the all-volunteer, all-student crews of drivers and state-certified emergency medical technicians juggle two or three 911 calls a day when school is in session, totaling more than 750 calls a year. RIT is the only college in the Rochester region, and one of about a dozen in the state, with its own ambulance.

RIT Ambulance, also known as RITA, recently received honors for quality and for its web-based records system at the National Collegiate EMS Foundation Conference in Philadelphia. RITA was one of 14 college agencies recognized for voluntarily undergoing a rigorous three-year accreditation process. The Website of the Year award recognized the site created by Michael DePasquale, 21, deputy chief of operations at RITA and a fifth-year student in computer game design and development. The site replaced uncoordinated paper records to handle RITA's scheduling, applications, call documentation, e-mailing and more.

"It means they're one of the top collegiate squads in our organization and in the country," said Dr. Michael Hilton, national coordinator of the National Collegiate EMS Foundation.

Out of more than 3,000 colleges nationwide, RIT is among roughly 250 that have a student-run emergency medical service organization. Of those, only half transport patients, according to the National Collegiate EMS Foundation. The others provide education only or - like University of Rochester, State University College at Geneseo, and Hobart and William Smith Colleges - provide quick first-responder care by foot, bicycle or car but need an off-campus ambulance service to get patients to a hospital.

While the number of community-based volunteer ambulance corps has shrunk nationwide for lack of volunteer time and financial support, the number of volunteer college EMS squads has grown, said Hilton, an emergency medicine resident at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. Campus corps typically get started by interested students and grow with support by their colleges, which tend to have more discretionary dollars than municipalities and see the advantage of fast response times and the opportunities for high-quality community service and student leadership growth, Hilton said. Well-established squads such as RITA also offer CPR classes, alcohol education and other outreach.

RIT Ambulance is celebrating its 30th anniversary as a state-certified agency. It's come a long way since its roots in the 1970s, when students provided first aid, inspected fire extinguishers and held doors open during fire alarms. Typically a uniformed crew staffs the RITA base from 6 p.m. to 7 a.m. daily, but the agency may respond to calls any time pager-carrying members are available. They handle sports injuries, car accidents, diabetic emergencies, drunken students and more.

RITA is part of the student health center and it has an annual budget of \$150,000. Dr. Brooke Durland, medical director for RITA and interim director of RIT's student health center, said the student EMTs and ambulance are assets in many ways, including being on standby at large field house events and transporting students from the health center to the hospital.

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Having an on-campus EMS service provides quicker responses; RITA averages five minutes or less. Patients also benefit because they are not billed for RITA's services - potentially saving them hundreds of dollars. The possible exception is if they need advanced life support, which is provided by paramedics and critical care technicians from off-campus services such as Henrietta Ambulance. RITA or the 911 dispatcher summons advanced life support in cases such as strokes, major trauma and respiratory distress. Chris Murtaugh, a 2001 RIT graduate who's now a paramedic with Henrietta Ambulance, said RITA's call volume has doubled in the last 10 years because there's more housing on campus.

The campus ambulance corps has decreased the load on the non-profit Henrietta Ambulance, which handles 5,800 calls in the community per year. Henrietta Ambulance responded to 538 calls at RIT in 2010, working alongside RITA or taking calls when RIT's ambulance was already tied up or no RIT crew was available.

Murtaugh, who is also a RITA alumnus, said the campus EMTs bring energy and a willingness to learn new ways. They are also up on the latest equipment and protocols.

At a recent cheerleading competition for middle and high school squads held at RIT, RITA handled 13 patients with asthma attacks, bumps and potential fractures.

One of the more memorable events was a rock concert by Breaking Benjamin a few years ago that produced more than 20 patients, including people who'd abused alcohol or drugs, fans who were dropped while crowd-surfing and the like.

"It just hooks people," said Mike Hoskins, 22, RITA's training director, about the appeal of the agency. The fifth-year student in multidisciplinary studies said he likes coaching newer members and seeing them progress.

Eight current members also have paid jobs with off-campus ambulance services.

Matt Purcell, 19, RITA vice president and a second-year student in industrial and systems engineering, said he's learned to talk to all kinds of people and to work under pressure. He and other RITA leaders said they respect the responsibility they have to patients and to the program- which includes budget planning. "We hold the same responsibility that people doing this as a career hold," Purcell said. Durland also acknowledged the educational benefits of the student-run ambulance service: "It's a great leadership opportunity for students."

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Some other Rochester-area campuses have an emergency response crew of student EMTs but don't own an ambulance for patient transports:

- University of Rochester's Medical Emergency Response Team, created in 1972, responds to about 300 calls a year.
- State University College at Geneseo's First Response, started in 1974, took 278 calls in 2010.
- Hobart and William Smith Colleges started a student Emergency Medical Services team in 2008 that handled 187 calls during the 2009-10 school year.