

# Leading the way

## Under TEEEX, the EMS Leadership Academy trains medics for a career in management

By Kelly Harrell

**E**rnie Rodriguez, now deputy director for Austin/Travis County EMS, learned EMS management the hard way. And he doesn't recommend it.

He'd been a firefighter and paramedic for several years before he applied for assistant director of EMS at the Corpus Christi Fire Department. After rounds of interviews, he was told he got the job and to report to administration rather than the fire station the following week.

"From then on, it was the school of hard knocks," Rodriguez says. "I was making every mistake known to man. We implemented a lot of great things. But it wasn't the easy way. I told myself that if I ever got the chance to do something so someone else wouldn't have to go through this, I would."

Rodriguez got his chance when he came to work for TDH (now DSHS) and convinced Gene Weatherall, chief of the Bureau of Emergency Management, and Pam West, state EMS director, to let him give it a try. TDH began offering a few classes for EMS personnel in quality management, grant writing and computer skills. (This was the early 1990s, remember.) But he had a bigger dream – a set curricula of classes created especially for the medic transitioning into management.

About the same time, Chris Black, then assistant EMS program director at Texas Tech, was offering classes in EMS management in

Lubbock. Having come up through the ranks himself, he knew how important the skills were.

"In EMS in general, we tend to look at people who are great medics and think they will make great supervisors," Black says. "But a supervisor and a practitioner are two different things. We were teaching people to be paramedics, but we weren't teaching them to be supervisors."

Black said he heard that Rodriguez wanted to start an EMS management academy. Rodriguez heard that Black was teaching EMS management classes in Lubbock. The result? Immediate distrust. Rodriguez wondered what an academic egghead knew about running an ambulance service. Black wondered what a guy from TDH knew about anything.

Their opinions changed when they spent a day together and found out they'd both paid their management dues: Rodriguez at the

Corpus Christ Fire Department and Black at several EMS providers in West Texas. Although each of the men had come from the different parts of the state and had different experiences in EMS, the men shared a dream of teaching EMS management. And Black says they shared a key trait.

"Ernie and I are wired the same – no challenge is too big to get over," he says. "We just concentrated on solutions."

The men and their respective agencies began a collaboration based on finding solutions. The EMS Management Academy (as it was first called) launched its first class in September of 1994 in Junction. The setting served two purposes. The rural setting, far from cell phone towers (at the time), meant students had to break their addiction to electronic devices such as phones, television and computers. The Junction campus, part of the Texas Tech system, was



*The first group to complete all three modules of the EMS Leadership Academy graduated last May. The academy teaches management skills to EMS personnel who want to move into system management. Texas Engineering Extension Service (TEEX) sponsors the courses, which are free to eligible personnel.*

also cheap. Room and meals for the week were only \$400. Instructors donated their time, so tuition was free. The academy was on the way to realizing its goal of creating the next generation of EMS leaders in Texas.

But in 1998, after several years of success, the Academy hit a series of obstacles. Rodriguez always knew that the academy would have to move to more permanent funding. But as budgets tightened at state agencies, that goal seemed even further away. In addition, the pool of interested candidates had shrunk as well.

“We had educated so many people that the demand for training had died out for a while,” Black says.

Key staff had left Texas Tech and TDH, which left no advocates at those agencies. Rodriguez reluctantly stored the class materials. For several years, he tried to keep the idea alive by incorporating as a non-profit and soliciting support. Eventually, he dissolved the organization.

John Rinard, who had worked with Ernie at TDH and had gone to work at Texas Engineering Extension Service (TEEX), had never forgotten about the EMS Management Academy. TEEX, part of the Texas A&M University System, has a history of providing hands-on training and technical assistance to emergency responders. In 2003, Rinard resurrected the idea of an EMS management academy with his boss, Lanny Smith, director of TEEX. The Leadership Academy, as it was now called, was one of several programs funded by TEEX using money appropriated by the Texas Legislature. Rinard says

the program filled a great need in EMS.

“We... have not done a good job of educating tomorrow’s leadership,” Rinard says. “It would be unheard of ... if we woke up one morning and took a person off the street, handed them a catheter and asked them to start an IV. (Yet) this is in essence exactly what we do with the leadership and succession process.”

An advisory board that read like a partial Who’s Who in Texas EMS was chosen to oversee curriculum development. Members included Ernie Rodriguez, Austin/Travis County EMS; Ralph Hendricks, Sherman Fire Department; Brett Hart, DSHS; Alan Johnson, Montgomery County Hospital District; David Phillips, Scott and White EMS; Scott Reichel, ECI; Judy Crum, representing the National Association of State EMS Directors; John Roquemore, president, NAEMT; Gene Gandy, Tech Pro Services, Inc.; and Dave Snively, LifeNet EMS. Forrest “Woody” Wood, former state EMS director for Arizona, was hired as a full-time coordinator.

The board oversaw the development of a three-part curriculum of 40 hours each. The first module, Basic Supervisory Practices, teaches the basics of supervision, including team development, time management, budget justification, employee complaints and working with the public. The second module, EMS System Management, focuses more on operational issues such as quality improvement, human resources law, performance measures, clinical practices management and ethics. The third



The first EMS Management Academy classes took advantage of the natural beauty of the Hill County. Ernie Rodriguez, left, was one of the instructors at the first courses in Junction.

and final part, EMS Executive Development, covers ethics, effective communication and strategic planning, and how to use leadership skills to manage organizations.

Gary Scarborough, deputy director for Austin County EMS, completed all three classes. He believes the courses helped him become a better manager and changed the way he approached problems.

“All too often EMS managers/administrators come up through the ranks ... and do not receive proper education (in) management techniques to run today’s EMS operations,” Scarborough says. “The courses are designed to encourage the modern-day supervisor, manager and administrator to rethink the way (they) operate.”

Academy classes are taught throughout the state and tuition is still free to eligible students, which include anyone in emergency response: paramedics, dispatchers and emergency room technicians. Agencies are encouraged to send personnel who are moving into supervisory roles. Since 2003, TEEX invested \$1 million in state money, mainly to provide a tuition subsidy to the 656 students from

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150 EMS and fire providers. The original estimate of 21 courses taught more than doubled. Last May, the first class of students to complete all three modules graduated from the program, the fulfillment of the dream first articulated by Rodriguez and Black.

“It’s great to see that an idea developed by Ernie (Rodriguez) and Pam (West) so many years ago ... was able to achieve the level of impact it has now.”

Black, now EMS department chair for Del Mar College in Corpus Christi, says he still has people approach him about those early EMS management classes.

“I would get letters and notes that saying the academy has helped me to be a better leader,” Black says. “It’s a very positive thing for the state and I’m happy to have been a part of it. If there’s anything other than my kids that I’m really proud of it’s seeing this thing become a success.”

For information about EMS Leadership Academy, available courses or how you can help with development activities, contact Forrest “Woody” Wood at [forrest.wood@teexmail.tamu.edu](mailto:forrest.wood@teexmail.tamu.edu) or at (979) 862-6949. You can look at course times and offerings on the web at [www.teex.com](http://www.teex.com).