

# The EMS Experience

Saluting those with 20 years or more in EMS

Bill Needles, EMT-P, Fleet/Facilities Management



At a recent award ceremony Bill Needles, EMT-P, received the “Old Dog” award for being the most tenured medic with Austin-Travis County EMS.

## What was your first day on the job in EMS?

I completed EMT training in 1974 in Cincinnati, Ohio. My first day on the job would have been a call as a volunteer EMT, which I definitely can't remember 35 years later. I was later enrolled in the first paramedic training program at the University of Cincinnati Medical School. While we were in paramedic school, a faculty member and staff surgeon visited our classroom and said he had just developed a technique to help choking victims. He wanted us to be the first to learn it.

His name was Henry Heimlich, and he taught us the Heimlich maneuver.

When I finished, there was no Ohio state paramedic exam. I graduated from paramedic school in 1978 and started working as a volunteer paramedic/firefighter for Delhi Fire Department, a suburb of Cincinnati where I lived until 1981.

## Which services have you worked for over the years?

I started out with Delhi Fire Department in Cincinnati, Ohio, as a volunteer EMT and paramedic/

firefighter from 1974 to 1981. My first paid EMS job was as a paramedic for Lifeline Ambulance, a private ambulance service in Hamilton, Ohio, doing hospital and nursing home transfers from 1978 to 1981. I was hired by Austin/Travis County EMS in 1981 and am still with them. Recently I was awarded the “Old Dog” trophy as the most tenured medic with the service.

I also worked part time for Air Ambulance America Flight Program for about five years in the 1990s doing fixed-wing flights around the world. I traveled to Canada, Mexico and Japan on some of the international flights, as well as numerous continental U.S. flights.

## Why did you get into EMS?

Like a lot of my early peers, I became interested in EMS from watching the TV show *Emergency*. It was very popular in the 1970s, and I started hanging out at the local volunteer fire department after school and on weekends. I took an EMT course right out of high school. I tried to go to business school at the University of Cincinnati, but I discovered that all I was interested in was EMS. I switched and went to paramedic school instead. Cincinnati had only one paramedic unit at the time, so it was very hard to get ride-out time.

## How has the field changed since you've been in it?

Where to begin on how much EMS has changed during my career! The training we received seems so basic now in comparison to the young paramedics coming out of school. We had Hare traction splints, in which you had to learn how to make and tie your own ankle hitches out of cravats. There were MAST trousers for shock. We had

*Needles as a STARFlight paramedic around 1989. The young child may have had croup, and holding him in that situation kept him calm and breathing easier.*



intra-cardiac EPI in preload syringes with four-inch needles to inject into the heart. We made our own chest decompression darts out of a 14-gauge angiocath and the finger off a rubber glove.

I started out working in a 1969 Cadillac Superior ambulance. There was a Federal Q siren on the roof, and whenever the driver hit the siren, all the lights (including the headlights) went dim. We had no portable radios, no pagers; instead you had to carry a Plectron with a rechargeable battery to receive calls.

When I moved to Austin, it was just a small college town with few traffic issues. We were a small department with only eight ambulances. The heart monitors were big and heavy. We tried to transmit EKGs on an APCOR radio, which worked about half the time. We started out with Ford vans, then extended vans, Ford 350s, and eventually medium-duty ambulances.

I was a flight paramedic on STARFlight for ten years in the late

1980s and 1990s. STARFlight was very different then—there were only three flight programs in Texas when we started. We covered 17 counties and were very busy for a one-aircraft program. There was no GPS, minimal weather radar, no night vision goggles. We navigated by using VOR and getting visual references of landmarks.

#### **Is there a particular moment or call that stands out?**

When I was a fresh paramedic in Cincinnati, I worked with a small volunteer fire department. We were dispatched to a collision involving a police car and a UPS delivery truck. I arrived to find one of my best police officer friends pinned in his cruiser. He drove through a red light while running code 3 and was t-boned by the delivery truck. He died before we could get him extricated. That call has stuck with me my entire career. Code 3 driving is one of the most dangerous things we do, and I have always stressed the notion of not being able to help anyone if you don't get there alive yourself.

#### **What has been your favorite part of your career in EMS?**

I think what I have enjoyed the most is the fact that this career is constantly evolving. People keep asking me when I am going to retire. I was eligible to retire with a good pension seven years ago. The ability to help people, or now the ability to provide the necessary facilities and fleet assets, is very rewarding. As long as I am healthy and still enjoy my job, I see no reason to retire. I learn new things every day. I am amazed at how smart the young paramedics are now and what advanced training they receive. I probably have a few more years left in an EMS career that has spanned more than 35 years so far. It's been a great ride and one that has never been boring.

*Do you have 20 years or more in EMS? Do you answer to dino-medic? We're looking for a profile of you! If you are interested, please write Kelly Harrell at [kelly.harrell@dshs.state.tx.us](mailto:kelly.harrell@dshs.state.tx.us)*