

Requests for EMS variances rise

By Kelly Harrell

Most people in Texas — and even in EMS — are not quite sure what a variance is as it relates to an ambulance. State law requires, for instance, that two certified personnel must be on an ambulance on all runs. It makes sense that anytime you see an ambulance, both people will have patches on their sleeves. Unless, that is, that ambulance has been granted a variance, or an exception, to the EMS rules.

For about three percent of EMS providers in Texas, that's the case. In fact, Chapter 773 of the Health and Safety Code says that a volunteer emergency medical services provider with a specific hardship may apply for a variance from the minimum standards for staffing and equipment for the provision of basic life-support emergency medical services. Variances, which by statute must be reviewed annually, are issued each January by DSHS. Statute requires DSHS to consider any relevant factors when renewing the variances, including the nearest available service; geography; and demography. Yet even if granted an annual variance, providers are encouraged in the statute to upgrade staffing and equipment to meet the minimum standards set by the rules.

Requests for variances have been rising. From 2003 to 2011, the number of variances rose from four a year to near 40. Since January 1, 2012, DSHS has granted 36 variances. Not surprisingly, most of the variances were granted for West Texas and the Panhandle (see map), where sparse populations and busy work schedules make it tough for providers to find volunteers available to staff an ambulance 24 hours a day. As one application said, "(W)e are all volunteers. We also have to work to make a living."

Since EMS is not a mandated service in Texas and some providers rely on volunteers to respond to emergencies, do diminishing numbers of volunteers mean even more variances in the future? There may be another solution. For years, Bolivar Peninsula had four volunteer EMS providers: Crystal Beach VFD and EMS, Port Bolivar VFD and EMS, High Island EMS and Gilchrist EMS. DSHS granted variances to all four of the services during the last few years. The situation did not improve after Hurricane Ike, which wiped out Gilchrist EMS and made it even harder to find volunteers. Then someone had this idea: Why not combine the three volunteer services (including taking over Gilchrist's area) into one? Working with DSHS and the county judges, emergency responders in the area banded together and formed Peninsula EMS, Inc. (PEMSI). The new service combines the personnel and resources from the three services, with a central leadership. The service began operations in early 2012.

State EMS Director Maxie Bishop thinks this kind of innovative thinking is exactly what is going to take rural and frontier EMS into the future. "We've got to find a solution for EMS in areas of the state where population is not growing, where it's harder to find people who have the time to volunteer in EMS," Bishop says. "People are going to have to look at the all resources they have and think of ways they can use them more creatively."



Peninsula EMS, Inc. (PEMSI) was created from three volunteer services on Bolivar Peninsula: Crystal Beach VFD and EMS, Port Bolivar VFD and EMS and High Island EMS. The new service covers the response area for Gilchrist EMS, which was devastated by Hurricane Ike.

