

January 1, 2012

Economy affects fire volunteerism

Monmouth County-wide force suggested; some squads thrive

By Nancy Shields / Staff Writer

Emergency response officials are working hard these days with fewer volunteers and more financial constraints to move their volunteer and career responders into the future.

In Neptune, Michael Bascom, the chief financial officer and emergency management coordinator for the township and Monmouth County, said that someday there could be a countywide emergency medical services system, not unlike in Gloucester County, which started its own countywide system in 2007 and reports good results on improving service.

But for now, Bascom's town has met an immediate need by creating two paid EMT positions to work from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. weekdays and to assist volunteer EMTs, firefighters and police. The positions are being paid for by the township and two fire districts, and residents are not being billed for ambulance calls.

Many towns do not have the volunteer pool they once had, with families that have two parents working and the unemployed concentrating more on looking for work than volunteering. For some the tradition of fire and first aid volunteering being handed down from one generation to the next is losing appeal. EMT training now requires a volunteer to spend 200 hours learning skills.

In Asbury Park, Monmouth County's only paid fire department carries out both fire and EMT duties, but the chief there, Kevin Keddy, also is working through challenges. The department's 2011 budget was \$4.5 million for 55 firefighters, and both Keddy and City Manager Terence Reidy are exploring shared services possibilities with other towns that could see career and volunteer firefighters work together, saving millions of dollars.

Asbury Park continues to require a paid department because of multifamily residences and the high density of 17,000 people living in a 1.4-square-mile city. Firefighters are paid to respond quickly, in under four minutes, to get fires out and to keep them from spreading or killing anyone.

But with nine firefighters on the shift for fire and first aid, Keddy needs more more staff and would like to see a countywide system in which career and paid firefighters work side by side, all possibly administered under the Monmouth County Sheriff's Office.

"There's a lot of angst," the chief said. "It's a volatile topic — very, very passionate."

The duplication of fire engines, ladder trucks and equipment among the numerous volunteer fire departments in 53 municipalities is not a secret but rather a source of pride to some fire departments and companies beloved in their towns. The county has 74 fire departments.

Keddy said Monmouth County is close in area and population to Baltimore County in Maryland, where the county oversees fire departments. Baltimore County has 88 engines — 27 are staffed by career fighters and 61 by volunteers — and 13 ladder trucks. Monmouth County has 226 engines and 52 ladder trucks, according to the county Fire Marshal's Office. Keddy believes that a new countywide system could cut the number of firetrucks needed in half.

"A countywide fire company sounds like a great idea, but you're never going to see it happen in this county," said Henry Stryker, the county fire marshal. "There are a lot of entrenched volunteer fire companies who take care of themselves and don't have as much manpower issues as people think."

But manpower is an issue in some towns. Asbury Park and Bradley Beach officials are talking about the possibility of

Asbury providing fire coverage, because the number of Bradley Beach fire volunteers has dwindled to the point of the town having to rely on mutual aid from others.

Robert Napoli, a longtime Bradley Beach firefighter and former Interlaken councilman who will be sworn into a new term this week, said Bradley Beach probably lost some of its volunteer pool as the town has transitioned from having a large number of blue-collar families to being more of a resort town.

"It's utterly ridiculous to duplicate equipment, especially in these trying times," Napoli said. "But why is there such a great resistance in joining a regional effort to save tax dollars?"

Bascom is a strong supporter of new legislation just passed and awaiting Gov. Chris Christie's signature. The proposed law grew out of a state Department of Health and Senior Services study in 2007 that found that New Jersey's emergency medical services system needed an overhaul.

The legislation would see increased training of all providers and would license ambulances to ensure that they have the most up-to-date medical protocols and standards for all residents.

The bill was opposed by the New Jersey State First Aid Council, which said it might cost volunteers money or cause a decline in the number of volunteers. But the New Jersey EMS Council, made up of numerous medical, hospital, emergency and health representatives, supported it.

Bascom and many outside of Asbury Park, and probably Keddy, know that he and his boss, Reidy, face significant challenges in pursuing what they believe will be a much better fire system, both in response and cost.

"He has a bigger hurdle," Bascom said. "You have to identify something beyond cost for that to happen. Most communities are willing to bear the cost. Fire and police have a very strong voice in the community. But they might get some level of regional services."

"Clearly it's the economy," Reidy said. "When people are looking at every penny and tax dollar and money donations to organizations, it's how we get the most for our investment."

"The approach I'm talking with the county about is that the entire system needs to be strengthened," Reidy said. "It is not about eliminating volunteers. It is about more effective coordination, about strengthening that system between career and volunteer. It is about analyzing our equipment, coordinating firehouses, making it a county network. ... Communities shouldn't be forced to give up their identities. It's really about providing better service for less money and that it is achievable, absolutely achievable."

Monmouth County Freeholder Thomas Arnone is one of those county officials backing shared services, but said he wants everyone to be able to keep their home rule. The county's approach, he said, is to take on police and fire dispatching for towns to save money or to help repair Asbury Park's firetrucks.

"Our big thing is we're looking at reducing costs, but we don't want to be in a confrontational situation between a town and their police, fire or first aid," Arnone said.

Bascom said Neptune reached the point of having to bring in paid EMTs because the township has 5,000 first aid calls annually. About 4,800 of those calls saw volunteers get there in a timely manner, but 200 did not.

Ocean Township's Wanamassa First Aid Squad is starting to supplement its volunteers with two paid EMTs to staff an ambulance from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. weekdays. Volunteers will take over on the weekends, said Pat Barrett, the Wanamassa First Aid president. The squad will bill people for the ambulance response, he said.

"We have 700 calls a year and decided for safety reasons to go to paid," Barrett said.

Keyport, on the other hand, is an example of towns that continue to have a strong volunteer system for fire and first aid, said Thomas Gallo, the president of Keyport's First Aid Squad as well as of Keyport's historical society.

He credited an active cadet program for people 14 to 18 years old with bringing about two new adult members a year into

the first aid squad.

Similarly, Frank Martuscelli, a fire commissioner in Neptune, said one of the reasons volunteers keep their fire department going is a strong cadet program for young people at the Shark River Hills Fire Company.

One of Bascom's concerns is to see the emergency medical service continue and be able to handle both day-to-day emergencies and catastrophes. He said, for example, that if not for the present volunteer system during Hurricane Irene in August, nursing homes could not have been evacuated because private agencies that would do the evacuating held contracts on multiple nursing homes.

"What hurts volunteers the most is the abuse of the 911 system," he said. "It's the overriding No. 1 strain on emergency services in town."

In Neptune's case, he said, nursing homes, a dialysis center, doctors' offices and a couple of residents make up almost half of the 911 EMS and fire calls.