

Partnerships with “Prehospital” Teams

BY RHODA WEISS

They are among the most visible and highly respected health care professionals in the community and are often the first contact for a patient and family facing a medical emergency. They deliver life-saving treatment and help protect and ensure optimal community health and physical well being. And they greatly influence the community's perception, choice, and use of a health care organization, its physicians, and services.

These members of the “prehospital” team—paramedics, firefighters, ambulance drivers, dispatchers, 911 staff, police officers, and other public health and safety personnel—are critical partners in building healthier communities and ensuring access to services. Therefore, the prehospital team's participation in the mission and message of your health care organization can be key to your overall success.

Organizations should never underestimate the importance of prehospital team members and should do everything possible to nurture and improve these relationships. How do you include them in your health care family? How can they help in an environment where most hospital emergency departments (EDs) face unmanageable numbers, a lack of beds, and inadequate staffing? What are some proven strategies to include them in your marketing, communications, and outreach activities?

A MEMBER OF THE FAMILY

Although a number of hospitals across the country serve as training sites for prehospital teams, all health care organizations could implement a number of strategies to improve relationships with them, including:

- Initiating an orientation for new members of the community's prehospital team. Some organizations invite new team members to their employee orientation and supplement this with monthly or quarterly “get-acquainted” programs, facility tours, and staff introductions. Others include family members during part of the program.



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- Surveying prehospital team members to ascertain satisfaction with your organization's facilities, personnel, reputation, and support of their needs. This helps identify unmet needs and activities that can improve communications and relationships with your organization and staff.

- Inviting prehospital team members to educational programs and events. Some require continuing education to maintain their certification status and can obtain the needed courses with attendance at your health-related seminars and classes.

- Including them in your annual employee service awards (e.g., at 5, 10, 15-plus years of service).

- Ascertaining their interest in conducting classes, participating in events, or speaking at educational offerings for your staff and community. CPR, first aid, public safety, and violence prevention could all be expertly addressed by the prehospital team.

- Placing them on advisory boards, internal and external committees, and task forces.

- Conducting goodwill visits to fire stations, EMS (Emergency Medical Services) facilities, and police precincts to deliver food, refreshments, updates, and educational programs.

- Holding an annual recognition program, with spouses invited, to honor team members' accomplishments and contributions to the community's health and welfare. At the event, update them on the organization's plans and activities and present certificates of appreciation suitable for display. EMS Week is held in May and provides opportunities to show appreciation for their contributions or cosponsor programs and activities.

- Making prehospital professionals part of your staff recognition program. Encourage doctors, employees, patients, and their family members to nominate them to be recognized alongside other staff members for their accomplishments and good deeds.

- Encouraging new hospital emergency staff members to participate in EMS and police ride-alongs.

Continued on page 12

- Showcasing them in internal and external newsletters and on bulletin boards and displays.

COLLABORATING TO IMPROVE EMERGENCY SERVICES

EDs across the country are experiencing overcrowded conditions, long waits for care, and frequent ambulance diversions because of a lack of hospital beds, especially in critical care areas. These conditions are attributable to many factors. More people are using the ED, a growing number of uninsured have no other way to access health services, and doctor appointments sometimes take weeks or months to secure. Also exacerbating the problem are shortages in emergency staff, hospital closures, downsizing in the number of hospital beds, and many more medical conditions being treated in the ED rather than in a hospital bed.

Savvy hospitals are realizing that prehospital teams can provide tremendous assistance in alleviating and even solving some of these challenges. They include:

- Asking members of the prehospital team to serve on task forces that address ways to improve activities and triaging before transporting as well as bettering conditions in the ED.
- Housing EMTs and paramedics in the ED to assist with patients between calls or cosponsoring urgent care areas in the ED.
- Working with home health services to provide more nonemergent care in the home.
- Improving communications with prehospital teams for better distribution of patients to the most appropriate sites.
- Increasing the clinical treatment capabilities and opportunities for paramedics in the field when medically appropriate.
- Designating an area in the ED for paramedics, equipped with telephones, computers, educational materials, refreshments, and comfortable furniture.
- Working together to educate the public about the EMS system and its appropriate use, injury prevention, and how to recognize and respond to a medical emergency.
- Creating a health and safety emergency-related website. The site could feature descriptions of the EMS and hospital emergency system and


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facilities, provide first-aid information, outline proper ways to access the system, and showcase other helpful information and community resources.

MARKETING AND PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGIES

Prehospital teams are your partners in creating healthier communities with programs that include:

- Targeting media events around holidays and issues. For example, on July 4, cosponsor a news conference on holiday safety—such as on the dangers of sunburns, fireworks, and barbecues. After incidences of violence, work together to reach young people on issues of violence prevention, identification, and action.
- Reducing violence through trauma prevention and education programs and campaigns. Ask EMT and hospital personnel to present school programs with videos of the challenges of traumatic injury and testimonials by young survivors and military veterans.
- Distributing emergency care and “home alone cards” to ensure that babysitters and “latchkey” young people without supervision have vital information at their fingertips.
- Distributing laminated shoe tags for children that store vital information in a computer chip.
- Creating a bicycle safety clinic with retailers, bicycle shops, ED personnel, police officers, and paramedics. Events may include safety inspections and demonstrations, free tuneups and brake adjustments, and a safety course to show the importance of wearing a helmet.
- Developing a home safety inspection guide and performing safety checks for car seats, home smoke detectors, first aid kits, and placement of potentially dangerous household products.
- Educating cellular phone users about how to properly contact EMS and how law enforcement personnel use wireless phones.
- Working with the media to develop stories, public service announcements, and other communication vehicles to deliver health and safety information on a regular basis. □

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