

With Adjustments, Good Year For Ambulance Service

By Michael Stein

If you're in the life-saving field in the midst of a pandemic, you have no choice but to find ways to cope with existing conditions and forge ahead.

The Barnesville Ambulance Service may have had some bumps in the road due to COVID-19, but made the best of things and still did what needed to be done.

"Yes, 2020 was a different year," Ambulance Manager Scott Nelson said. "We had to adapt to conditions quite a bit, but got some positives out of that. For example, our monthly meetings had to be held virtually, but we had better attendance because people didn't have to drive a long way and could check in from home or work."

Nelson said they also found more online resources for continuing education, something every EMT has to keep up on.

"I've even had several members want to continue using online education as an option," Nelson said. "For some it's not always easy to find and attend classes in person, so doing more online can be a real positive."

Much of the face-to-face interaction that ambulance staff count on for exchanging information and ideas has been on hold.

"A lot of that interaction normally happens at conferences, but many of those have been cancelled or gone online. We've always had an annual conference in Fergus Falls that was fairly popular, but that had to be cancelled. Some agencies just don't have the systems set up to hold conferences online. So we find other ways to get those continuing education hours in."

As far as staffing goes, the service dealt with some shortages. Some of the volunteer staff members had family members with health issues, so there were some challenges to filling the schedule.

"Another challenge we faced was with supplies and consumables, such as gloves and masks, because of the incredibly high demand," Nelson said. "Prior to the pandemic we used maybe five masks a year.



Each January in Barnesville, local volunteers take time to host an appreciation event for area first responders, such as personnel from police, fire, ambulance, county sheriff, and highway patrol. This year, because of the pandemic those volunteers brought their gifts of appreciation directly to the departments. Seen here is Barnesville Ambulance Manager Scott Nelson graciously receiving a basket for the ambulance crew members from the event's committee members. From left, Ross Rehder, Margo Haskin, Scott Nelson and Becky Stout.

Now it's like five a week. We have supplies on reserve and have always had enough, but it's still an issue we're concerned about. Costs have also gone up. A box of gloves may have been around four or five dollars before. Now it's around 15 dollars. We're just being much more careful with keeping supplies on hand."

Barnesville Ambulance Service benefited from state and federal grant money in 2020.

"We did get quite a bit of grant dollars last year," Nelson said. "We received nearly \$30,000 from the Minnesota Department of Health, and that set us up pretty well for equipment. We were able to purchase two ventilators, which is something we would not normally have on hand, but could still use."

Nelson said they also received \$14,000 in CARES funding from area townships.

"This was from funds the townships received but didn't have

the need, so they came to us to see if we could use the dollars," Nelson said. "We put part of those funds into computer upgrades and new screens we'll use for online classes. And we put part of the funds toward salaries to help offset our budget."

Ambulance calls were pretty much the same in 2020 as they were in 2019. Over the last four years, the call numbers have been:

- 2017: 313
- 2018: 305
- 2019: 325
- 2020: 319

"We did have contact with some positive COVID cases," Nelson said. "But with the precautions we're taking, none of our members contracted it through their work with the ambulance service. We did have some positive cases on the staff, but those were contracted through other means."

"It was a little slower in March and April last year," Nelson said. But we ended the year with about 15 to 20 more calls than the previous year."

On the scene of an ambulance call, Nelson said they generally know ahead of time if it's COVID-

related.

"We have only one person interacting with the patient," he said. "The other person on the call is also garbed up, but has limited contact. We transported eight to ten COVID patients that we know of. Most of those were not real sick at the time."

Ambulance staff who were positive for the virus exhibited only moderate symptoms.

"My biggest fear has been my having close contact and needing to isolate for two weeks," Nelson said. "So we made a lot of contingency plans. And pretty much everyone has had both rounds of the vaccine. That doesn't mean we still can't get the virus, so we continue to take the same precautions."

The Barnesville Ambulance Service generally has a presence at events like the community picnic, Showcase, Clay County Fair and Potato Days. All those events were cancelled in 2020.

"Those are big events for the service because it's good public relations for us to be out there," Nelson said. "And it's a double-edged sword because of lost income. We're paid to be out at Rollag for the Steam Threshers event and the Clay County Fair."

Looking ahead, Nelson said the ambulance service is always looking for new members to keep up with staffing needs.

"Staffing is always a challenge whether there's a pandemic or not," Nelson said. "That's especially true on weekdays. A majority work full time during the day, but things always seem to work out in the end. We have a good group doing the best job possible."

The Barnesville Ambulance Services includes 28 volunteers: seven paramedics and 21 EMTs.



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