

OCTax Members in the News

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Always Ready, Always There

City and Medix Ambulance Service have a longtime relationship

By Jonathan Volzke

Michael Dimas built his first ambulance in his parents' garage. He had worked for a couple of ambulance companies in Orange County when he decided to go into business for himself, so he bought a 1977 Dodge van and went to work in the garage. Then he worked seven days a week for five years to build Medix Ambulance Service.

Now 29 years later, Medix has a fleet of 35 ambulances and other vehicles and 150 employees. One of just 13 companies in the state recognized by the Commission on Accreditation of Ambulance Services, Medix has served San Juan Capistrano for 20 years.

While the city is served by the Orange County Fire Authority (OCFA), Capistrano leaders retain the right to choose which ambulance company is used in town. "They've been doing a very good job," said Mayor Sam Allevato, a retired police officer who represents Capistrano on the OCFA board of directors. "I've never received any complaints about them, and from my own experience, when my mother was living with us and fell twice, they responded and did a great job. They were very kind and efficient."

When someone calls for help, OCFA's dispatch station electronically notifies the Medix dispatch center in the company's Mission Viejo headquarters. The response is also verbally confirmed. Medix then rolls an ambulance with two licensed emergency medical technicians to the call. OCFA requires the ambulance to arrive on scene within 10 minutes of being notified for a critical call—with lights and sirens—and within 20 minutes for non-emergency calls in at least 90 percent of the calls. In the quarter ending in June, Medix met the response-time requirements for 97 percent of the calls.

The company responded to 596 calls during the period, transporting 410 patients. Medix, which also serves Cypress, Laguna Niguel, Lake Forest, Los Alamitos, Mission Viejo, Rancho Santa Margarita and Seal Beach, responds to 30,000 medical-aid calls a year.

Just as OCFA reviews the ambulance services, the Orange County board of supervisors sets the rates they charge. The emergency base rate is \$601.50, with an additional \$13.75 for each mile traveled with a patient. There are also charges for oxygen, expendable medical supplies and standby time that starts 15 minutes after an ambulance arrives on scene.

Dimas, 54, said state-of-the-art equipment ensures his rigs are where they need to be when they need to be. He said he put the first computer-aided dispatch systems in ambulances back in 1989, and the system now can recommend where units will be needed on any given day and time, based on previous calls.

But that efficiency also caused some heartache for Medix. Dimas wants to rely on a regional response system in the cities he covers, rather than stationing two \$165,000 ambulances in San Juan Capistrano around the clock, seven days a week. San Juan officials are satisfied with the current arrangement—one ambulance here around the clock, another stationed here during the peak period of 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday. “It’s an issue to work out,” Allevato said. “But it does not in any way reflect on the service they provide to the city.”

Despite the dispute, Dimas credits OCFA for giving Medix the opportunity to grow. In the past, there wasn’t much room for newcomers in the ambulance business. Medix got its first big break after a couple of tragedies at Disneyland spurred the theme park to hire an outside ambulance company. Medix got the job. “Having that contract put us on the map,” Dimas said.

In 1982, the ambulance industry was deregulated, and a few years later, county fire officials conducted its first competitive ambulance procurement, comparing companies side by side. And San Juan Capistrano was among Medix’s first contracted cities. The city recognized the relationship between the city and ambulance company on August 7, with a resolution honoring Dimas and Medix for an annual \$2,500 sponsorship for the city’s July 4 celebration in the Sports Park.

Medix also recently donated a portable automatic defibrillator to the Community Services Department, to keep on hand in case of heart attack at events including the Summer Nites concerts. Dimas said donations such as those, as well as providing standby rigs at the rodeo and other events are just part of the special role an ambulance company should play with communities.

“Our primary mission is so others can live,” Dimas said. “That was our founding principal way back then, and it remains that today. You treat every patient like a member of your own family.”

And that 1977 Dodge van? It’s still licensed and legally ready go, designated as Medix Unit 1.