

EMTs hope new gear eases load Personnel train using system for overweight patients

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Medic Ambulance's new Bariatric unit designed to assist larger patients is introduced to fire station 24 captain George Everett, right. (Stacey J. Miller/Times-Herald)

It's bad enough being rushed to the emergency room in great pain. But imagine becoming a neighborhood spectacle as 10 emergency personnel are needed to hoist your gurney into an ambulance.

A newly equipped ambulance and gurney system designed for severely overweight Solano County residents might eliminate some of that unwanted attention.

The Vallejo-based Medic

Ambulance began using a specialized bariatric ambulance last week in response to the monthly average of six to seven emergency calls the company receives for obese patients.

On Tuesday, Medic personnel began training Vallejo's fire and emergency medical service personnel on specialized gurneys and a pulley system that loads and unloads overweight patients. The two agencies work as a team on calls, particularly on those requiring extensive backup for heavier clients. Vallejo fire officials expect training for all 72 firefighters to be completed by the end of the week.

"The biggest thing on this is for the patient," Vallejo Fire Captain Mike Lionel said. "They're just squeezed in there (in the current ambulances) and you can actually hear the (gurney) - it creaks."

A remodeled larger ambulance is the lynch pin of Medic Ambulance's upgrade. The new gurney is twice the normal size and can support up to 1,600 pounds, more than twice the typical 650 pounds, said Medic Ambulance Paramedic Supervisor Jimmy Pierson. Emergency medical technicians also have enough leg room next to the enlarged gurney to treat the patients.

Medic Ambulance moved the bariatric unit from Sacramento, where it's been in service for a year and a half, to better serve 911 calls in Solano County, Pierson said. The change will not cost the county or city more, Pierson said.

"When you see the patients, they kind of feel an inconvenience, and you feel bad that you can't help," Pierson said of overweight patients using standard, smaller equipment.

The modified ambulance is being added to Medic's current 18. It only will respond to emergency calls involving overweight clients, Pierson said.

A police and fire database with voluntary information on special-needs Vallejoans includes extremely overweight residents, so emergency personnel can immediately respond with appropriate equipment, said Vallejo Fire Department EMS Coordinator Danny Richards.

The special needs database forms are available from any Vallejo fire station, at the Vallejo Police Department at 111 Amador St. or online in the fire department section of the city's Web site, www.ci.vallejo.ca.us.

Richards said he noticed the number of obese patients began rising locally about 10 years ago. The new ambulance couldn't come at a better time, Richards said.

"Especially in emergencies like cardiac arrests, getting into the ambulance, getting people to the hospital in a timely manner is huge," Richards said.
"Hopefully, this will reduce the amount of manpower for one patient - it requires so much more manpower without this."

Kaiser Permanente accommodates overweight patients through dedicated teams, specially trained to lift and move heavier clients, specialized bariatric chairs, wider beds and wheelchairs and an enlarged year-old CAT scan machine.

"We're trying to do everything that we can to take care of our patients and to keep them safe," said Kaiser Medical Center-Vallejo spokeswoman Valerie Roberts Gray.

Sutter Solano Medical Center is also equipped to care for obese patients. In its intensive care unit and in surgery, patient beds can hold up to 800 pounds, Sutter spokesman Russell Sy Neilson said.