Volunteerism drops; costs increased, leave squad “in a bind”

by Tom Chillemi

The Middlesex County Volunteer Rescue Squad (MCVRS) needs help. Volunteers are needed and costs are rising. MCVRS officers include, from left, President Lynn White, Treasurer Leslie Krom and Captain Ole Albert. Joining them is, continuing from left, Middlesex Emergency Services Coordinator David Layman. (Photo by Tom Chillemi)

The volunteer rescue squad that formed in Deltaville in 1956 was reportedly one of the first rescue squads in Virginia. As the Middlesex County Volunteer Rescue Squad (MCVRS) starts its 69th year, keeping the word “volunteer” in its name is becoming increasingly difficult.

General declining volunteerism and rising costs have put the MCVRS in a bind, MCVRS Captain Ole Albert told the Middlesex County Board of Supervisors at its Jan. 3 work session.

In the past, the county rescue squads were staffed by volunteers. Since 2016, Middlesex County government has paid an agency to supplement staffing to fully staff the rescue squad in Urbanna. Now, only about 15% of emergency calls are handled by volunteers.

The Deltaville-Hartfield rescue squad still has a small but dedicated group of volunteers. However, paid staff runs about 85% of the calls in the lower part of Middlesex, said Albert. “It’s critical right now.”

Keep in mind that volunteers still manage and take care of upkeep and logistics.

Staffing costs $1.1 million

Both the Deltaville and Urbanna MCVRS buildings must be staffed with at least two people — an EMT, which is now known as a “provider,” and an “operator,” which drives the ambulance and often assists with patient care. Paid staffing costs about $1.1 million annually, said Albert.

The MCVRS recently bought and upgraded a building in Urbanna at a cost of roughly $200,000 to house ambulances and to give staff a place to stay while on duty. A station in Urbanna is necessary to be able to service the upper part of the county in a safe and timely manner.

Last year the MCVRS ran a total of 2,371 calls. Insurance companies will only pay for a call if the patient is transported to a hospital. “We have many calls of a more community service character,” said Albert. “These calls can be to assist citizens

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have fallen and need help getting up, he said. There is no financial compensation for these types of calls.

Funds and expense

The MCVRS and the MCVRS Auxiliary raises roughly $200,000 annually. The auxiliary offers weekly bingo games and operates two thrift stores. “We owe a great thank you to the auxiliary,” said Albert.

Fundraisers like the Rescue Regatta, which started two years ago, raised about $25,000.

Much more money is needed to pay for staffing, said Albert.

Ambulances

The MCVRS, based at the Deltaville building, still maintains and pays for all ambulances, buildings and equipment in the county, said Albert. A new ambulance was ordered two years ago and will be delivered this spring at a cost of $370,000, PLUS another $100,000 to equip it. Most vehicle maintenance and upkeep is done by volunteers, but some work has to be done by professionals.

There are eight people on the MCVRS board and they also staff shifts. Albert said he is on duty 48 to 60 hours a month. In addition to emergency calls, volunteers teach CPR and standby at football games. The Urbanna Oyster Festival requires six units with two-person staff each, said Albert. “Thankfully we have support from neighboring counties in these instances,” he said.

The strain on the MCVRS has been ongoing for a long time, Albert told the board of supervisors last week. “We have emptied our own coffers. . . . We have to find a way to keep going.”

Saluda District Supervisor Don Harris commented, “Changes may have to occur. It’s a hot item for us.”