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IN EMERGENCY SERVICES

Why EMS Gets No Respect

Minutes from a congressional hearing

By John Becknell

Ruminations

Congressman (clearing throat and tapping gavel): In light of complaints about the absence of recognition for EMS during the recent 9/11 remembrances and President Obama's September jobs speech, we've convened these hearings to learn about your needs and issues. What do you see as the greatest need facing emergency medical services in America today?

Ms. Johnson: Thank you, congressmen and women. I represent the majority of EMS agencies across America—the more than 12,000 volunteer ambulance services that serve our rural communities. Without question, the biggest challenge facing EMS is the decline in volunteerism. All across the United States, hundreds, if not thousands, of ambulance services are operating with minimal numbers of overworked volunteers. With the consolidation of health care and the regionalization of medical specialties, EMS is needed in rural areas more than ever, yet in some areas, volunteer services are closing. We desperately need help developing an alternative to volunteer labor.

Mr. Conners: Members of Congress, I must respectfully disagree with my rural colleague. I represent the private ambulance industry and would like to remind you that nearly 80 percent of the populations in the United States live in urban areas and are best and most cost-effectively served by private ambulance providers. Because private ambulance companies seek to provide high-quality services efficiently, it is imperative that you assist us in addressing the reimbursements we receive from Medicare.

Chief Roydan (chuckling): Please forgive me, ladies and gentlemen, but private ambulance companies are in business to make money. Their ultimate motive is profit, and EMS should not be about profit. In urban and rural communities across America, the fire service is the best practice for providing EMS. Of course this makes practical and economic sense, as the fire service is an established community service with the history, infrastructure and resources to do the job better than

anyone else. We need the federal government to recognize this by consolidating all first responder activity and all federal EMS activity within the U.S. Fire Administration. This would be an important step toward recognizing fire as the clear leader in the provision of EMS.

Dr. Green: Distinguished members of the panel, while I certainly acknowledge the concerns of my EMS colleagues, as an EMS physician, I can tell you that it matters very little who provides EMS if the care provided is not backed up by research. As many studies have attested, the greatest need facing emergency medical services—and I emphasize the word *medical*—is finding the medical evidence to support the care that EMS provides every day, everywhere. We urgently need federal help to fund the research needed to ensure that EMS patient care is based on solid medical evidence.

Ms. Dobson: As a paramedic representing the hundreds of thousands of EMS workers across America, I am honored to be here. Without question, the most important issue facing my co-workers and me is the continuing and unnecessary changes in educational requirements. These changes are often made without adequate input from field workers and become huge barriers to recruiting and keeping quality people. This coming year, new changes will dramatically increase the amount of time it takes to become a basic EMT in the field. This is the most pressing issue for EMS across the nation because it has the potential to dramatically diminish the ranks of prepared workers.

Congressman: You seem to have quite different views about EMS and what is needed, so perhaps we should try another question. Is there anything you all agree on? **BP**

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