

2015 Stars of Life Celebration and Legislative Summit

Siren

SPRING 2015

A PUBLICATION OF THE CALIFORNIA AMBULANCE ASSOCIATION



An Update on California's UI Program



CAA Vision

Assure delivery of excellent pre-hospital care to the people of California by promoting recognized industry best practices.

CAA Mission

- Serve as the voice and resource on behalf of private enterprise emergency and non-emergency ambulance services.
- Promote high quality, efficient and medically appropriate patient care.
- Advocate the value that pre-hospital care provides in achieving positive patient outcomes.
- Promote effective and fiscally responsible EMS systems and establish standards for system design.

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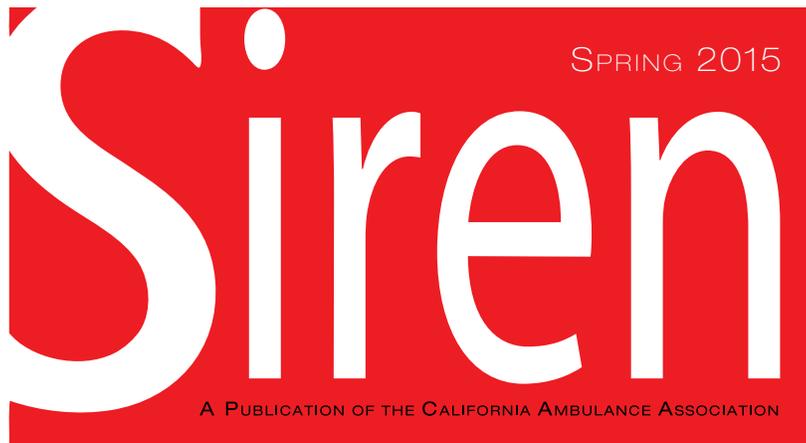


Table of Contents

- 1 | **Chair's Message** | *Richard Angotti*
- 2 | **Executive Director's Report** | *Ross Elliott*
- 3 | **Legislative Update** | *Chris Micheli, Esq.*
- 5 | **Member News** | EMS Week + CPR Day
- 6 | **Member News** | 2015 CAA Stars of Life Awards
- 8 | **Feature Article** | An Update on California's UI Program
| *Chris Micheli, Esq.*
- 9 | **Feature Article** | An Additional Hike in the Minimum
Wage is Unwarranted | *Chris Micheli, Esq.*
- 11 | **Feature Article** | Del Norte Ambulance Ambulance
Stands the Test of Time

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Circulation among California's private ambulance providers, elected officials and EMSA administrators.

Chair's Message



Richard Angotti | *Chair of the Board*

Never a Dull Moment with the CAA

From Capitol visits with our legislators and honoring our Star of Life Award recipients in Sacramento to sponsoring and exhibiting at the EMSAAC conference in Coronado and participating in the EMS Commission meetings, the CAA has been busy representing your interests all over the state.

We held the annual Stars of Life Celebration & Legislative Summit in Sacramento on March 23-24, 2015. We honored 31 Stars and hosted guest speakers Assemblyman Freddie Rodriguez and EMSA Director, Dr. Howard Backer. Thank you to DerManouel Insurance Group, San Luis Ambulance, Paramedics Plus, Bound Tree Medical, King American Ambulance, American Legion Post #108 Ambulance, Medic Ambulance and the CAA Printing Co-op for sponsoring this event and being an integral part of its success.

Also in this issue, you can read about CAA's EMS Week activity, teaching hands only CPR on the steps of the California Capitol on May 20, 2015.

The CAA's Legislative & Agency Relations Committee continues to meet once a month to discuss bills that could have an impact on your business. Please see Chris Micheli's Legislative Update in this issue for an overview. The Payer Issues Committee will have a meeting later this month with Xerox and DHCS to discuss the reimbursement issues plaguing your businesses.

I look forward to seeing many of you at the 67th Annual Convention and Reimbursement Conference on September 23-25, 2015 at the Anaheim Marriott in Anaheim, CA. The theme for this year's convention is "Celebrating the Past, Present and Future." We'll host the newly renamed Lim McNeal Memorial Golf Tournament on September 23rd, celebrate the year's accomplishments during the Chair's Banquet on September 24th and be treated to quality education set up by the Education Committee on September 24th and 25th. Please watch your inbox for the sponsorship opportunities and registration brochure. *

Executive Director's Report



Ross Elliott | Executive Director

Being hired as the CAA Executive Director in March has been thrilling and a distinct privilege. Private ambulance companies are the backbone of EMS. By necessity, private ambulance companies operate efficiently and cost-effectively while providing high quality, appropriate, and rapid medical care. Having the opportunity to be part of the Association that represents the interests of many of the ambulance companies in California that I admire and respect is a great honor.

Today's reimbursement climate threatens the viability of private ambulance companies. If private ambulance companies falter, the face of EMS will be dramatically different and service will be significantly diminished. Medi-Cal reimbursement to private ambulance companies is disturbingly low; California reimburses at one of the lowest rates in the nation. This was lowered even further in 2009 with an across-the-board 10 percent reduction. There has been not been a Medi-Cal increase for the services provided by private ambulance companies for at least 10 years. There have not even been adjustments to keep pace with inflation. Some CAA members claim that Medi-Cal

reimbursement is only offsetting 4 percent of their actual costs. In other words, for every \$1 spent providing care to a Medi-Cal patient, California is paying the private ambulance company 4 cents. With millions more Californians now covered with Medi-Cal as part of the Affordable Care Act implementation, the reimbursement situation is not improving.

The California legislature has acted to improve Medi-Cal reimbursement for a small portion of ambulance services, but those improvements are only for public agencies. The *Ground Emergency Medical Transportation (GEMT)* program provides additional Medi-Cal reimbursement for public agency ambulance services in California - primarily fire departments. These public agencies are tax-supported/publically-funded government operations. Public agencies comprise only 22 percent of all patient transport service statewide. Three large fire departments (Los Angeles City Fire, Sacramento Metro Fire, and San Francisco Fire) represent half of all public agency patient transport service. The remaining 149 other public agency ambulance services combined total only 11 percent of patient transports.

Private ambulance companies are not eligible nor have they benefitted from the GEMT program. For the public to be adequately protected, private ambulance companies, which provide 78 percent of the ambulance service in California, must remain viable.

This year, a great deal of effort is being made to improve Medi-Cal reimbursement. The

CAA Board of Directors is working on a multi-faceted strategy to effect change. Details of the various strategies will be forthcoming in a later issue. But, one essential part of the strategy is to build CAA membership. Our credibility as an industry is greater when we "speak as one" and work together towards the achievement of common goals. Having the ability to serve as the "collective voice" for the majority of private ambulance companies in California will provide the critical mass for us to be heard.

In addition to building membership, there are 3 pieces of legislation under consideration in Sacramento to improve Medi-Cal reimbursement. CAA members and all private ambulance companies in California are urged to get in touch with their Assembly-member and State Senator and ask them to support AB 366, SB 243, and AB 1257. If your elected representative does not know these bills are important to you, he/she may not have a reason to vote for them. Take the time to make these calls or meetings with your legislators; the importance of your involvement cannot be overstated.

Private ambulance companies must remain viable emergency service providers if EMS systems expect to maintain high-quality and cost-effective service and care. Losing private ambulance service providers due to inadequate reimbursement for services and replacing them with public agency ambulance services ensures cost for ambulance service will go up and the extent of services will go down. *

Legislative Update



Chris Micheli | *Legislative Advocate*

There has been a lot of legislative activity over the past few months as the 2015 Legislative Session is in full swing. As you will read below, the CAA has been very busy on behalf of its membership concerning a dozen pieces of legislation of interest to the private ambulance industry in this state. The following is a brief description of those bills:

ASSEMBLY BILLS

CAA is actively supporting the EMS legislative package being authored by Assemblyman Freddie Rodriguez, who was once honored as a “Star of Life” by the CAA. We are supporting his **AB 319 (Rodriguez)**, which would require CPR training as a part of the high school curriculum, giving high school students the confidence and lifesaving skills to better prepare them for emergency situations in the future. We spoke in support of this measure and it is moving along the process.

Like SB 243, CAA submitted a support letter for **AB 366 (Bonta)**, because both of these bills are intended to reverse the 10% cut in Medi-Cal reimbursements that legislators approved in 2011 and the bill will restore full funding to Medi-Cal providers. We have testified in favor of this legislation, as well as at the policy and budget subcommittee hearings during the past few months of the Medi-Cal budget. This bill is in the Assembly Appropriations Committee

and has a large price-tag, so it is unlikely to pass, but we continue to work on increasing Medi-Cal provider rates as part of the overall state budget.

We are also supporting **AB 503 (Rodriguez)**, which would permit hospitals to release patient-identifiable medical information to pre-hospital EMS providers for quality assessment and improvement purposes. The bill would also limit the disclosure of information to data found to be “minimally necessary.” Obtaining this data would help the patient by improving the quality of care provided. Current state law does not explicitly permit these disclosures. This bill is pending before the fiscal committee.

CAA is also supporting **AB 510 (Rodriguez)**, which would require the Office of Emergency Services (OES), by January 1, 2017, to conduct a comprehensive review of California’s 911 emergency communications system, including all public safety answering points, available technology, funding needs, and telephone and equipment limitations, and provide a report on its findings to the Legislature, to include specified information and recommendations. We spoke in favor of this important measure as well.

We submitted a support letter on **AB 1129 (Burke)** because current LEMSA

Continued on page 4



Legislative Update

Continued from page 3

practice of dictating specific software for EMS provider reporting is contrary to the goal of NEMSIS, which is the setting of a standard for the exchange of healthcare information among different providers and agencies. It is not meant, nor necessary, to mandate a particular software to meet this standard. There are many software programs and vendors that are compatible with the NEMSIS standards and that can facilitate the exchange of required healthcare information to the state and federal NEMSIS depositories. As long as the different agencies use compliant software, the exchange can be made and the mandate fulfilled. CAA has been involved in numerous discussions regarding the language of this bill in order to address opposition concerns.

Similar to our support for AB 366 and SB 243, CAA is also actively supporting **AB 1257 (Gray)** because it would require the DHCS to establish payment rates for ground ambulance services based upon changes in the CPI and the GPCI by using the ambulance cost study conducted by the federal GAO. This is another effort to increase Medi-Cal provider rates that is being spearheaded by Hall Ambulance. This measure is pending in the Appropriations Committee and the proponents are trying to determine what funding mechanism will be used to create funds that can be matched by the federal government.

SENATE BILLS

CAA signed onto the California Chamber's coalition letter in opposition to **SB 3 (Leno)**, along with over 60 organizations. The Cal Chamber has tagged SB 3 as a "Job Killer". CAA has been a primary opposition witness in the policy and fiscal committees arguing that the State should not be imposing additional costly burdens on private ambulance providers when it has failed to properly compensate us for our cost of medical transportation. SB 3 seeks to increase the minimum wage even higher to \$13 an hour by 2017 and, thereafter, increase

it according to inflation. We expect this bill to pass out of the Senate (like last year's version did, which was SB 935 (Leno)).

CAA sent a support, if amended, letter on **SB 120 (Anderson)** in order for both the public and private sectors would be treated equally for tax purposes. SB 120 would exempt from taxation any public safety first responder vehicle and any equipment required on those vehicles purchased by a local public agency. So, the bill only applies to the public sector. We believe that the bill should be amended to include vehicles and equipment purchased by a private emergency medical services provider so that the public and private sectors would enjoy the same benefits under the bill. Otherwise, public agencies and private providers would be treated in unequal terms and public agencies would enjoy a tax benefit not afforded to the private sector. Both public and private sectors are reimbursed at the same rates. As such, purchases of vehicles and equipment should not favor one over the other. We took a similar position last year, but the measure failed passage early. We will continue to press our case this year as well.

CAA submitted an oppose, unless amended, letter on **SB 239 (Hertzberg)**, which is sponsored by the California Professional Firefighters. We requested that the bill be amended to exclude Health & Safety Code Section 1797.201. This bill proposes to add another layer of bureaucracy by introducing a LAFCO as some sort of oversight body for changing fire service boundaries. Yet, the people who comprise LAFCO staff and boards have no background or understanding of the complexities of EMS administration. In addition, the issue of "201 rights" is already being addressed by potential rulemaking activity. Specifically, this issue is being clarified by the Chapter 13 Task Force under the direction of the state EMS Authority. As such, this rulemaking activity, which involves all of the public and private EMS providers, is the more appropriate forum for any issues related to .201 to be addressed. We are trying to work on amendments with CPF to address our concerns. The bill has passed the policy

committee and is now pending in the fiscal committee.

Like AB 366, CAA submitted a support letter for **SB 243 (Hernandez)**, because both of these bills are intended to reverse the 10% cut in Medi-Cal reimbursements that legislators approved in 2011 and the bill will restore full funding to Medi-Cal providers. We have testified in favor of this legislation, as well as at the policy and budget subcommittee hearings during the past few months of the Medi-Cal budget. This bill is in the Senate Appropriations Committee and has a large price-tag, so it is unlikely to pass, but we continue to work on increasing Medi-Cal provider rates as part of the overall state budget.

CAA also submitted a letter of support for **SB 326 (Beall)**, which makes permanent the penalty of \$4 per conviction for a violation of the Vehicle Code, other than a parking offense. These funds are, in turn, deposited into the Emergency Medical Air Transportation Act Fund. This program is scheduled to sunset on January 1, 2016. SB 326 would remove the sunset date. We have testified at the policy and fiscal committees in favor of this bill.

CAA signed another California Chamber of Commerce coalition letter in support of **SB 658 (Hill)**, which would provide that neither a business that acquires an AED for its premises, nor an individual that renders emergency assistance with an AED will be civilly liable for any damage, unless their conduct is willful or grossly negligent. This limitation of civil liability for being a good actor and trying to assist people in need will encourage the placement of AEDs in public areas as well as their use when needed. We have testified in two policy committees in favor of this bill and have participated in numerous meetings, calls and discussions about potential amendments to address the concerns of the opposition (mainly plaintiffs' lawyers). ❀

Member News



EMS Week + CPR Day

In recognition of National Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Week, EMTs and Paramedics from throughout California came to Sacramento to host Hands-Only CPR Training at the California State Capitol on May 20, 2015.

This event was held to celebrate National Emergency Medical Services Week, May 17-23, 2015, to honor the dedication of those who provide the day-to-day lifesaving services of medicine’s “front line.” The theme of the 2015 EMS Week was “EMS Strong.”

“Less than 10% of the population requires prehospital emergency medical care each year; therefore, most have little idea of the sophistication of our EMS system,” said Richard Angotti, Chair of the California Ambulance Association. “California has 20,000 paramedics and 70,000 emergency medical technicians in 3,600 ambulances delivering the highest quality patient care from the field to the hospital emergency department. Their commitment to ensuring that all patients receive the best medical care available, anytime and anywhere, is an essential part of building a health care system that functions efficiently and effectively every day.”

Assemblymember Freddie Rodriguez authored Assembly Concurrent Resolution 10 to proclaim the week of May 17th through May 23rd as Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Week in California and honor the EMS personnel who dedicate their lives to providing life-saving medical care to others in their time of need.

“I have spent my life working as an Emergency Medical Technician. It is important to me to honor my brothers and sisters in the EMS field and I was proud to be able to do that during EMS Week,” said

Assemblymember Rodriguez. “EMS workers are some of the most dedicated individuals that I know. They possess a strong sense of desire to help others and that sense of duty stays with you for life.” ✱





2015 California Ambulance Association Stars of Life Awards Presented to Outstanding EMS Personnel

The California Ambulance Association presented its annual “Stars of Life” Awards to thirty-one paramedics, EMTs and other EMS staff from throughout California during a ceremony on March 23rd in Sacramento.

Throughout the day, the Stars met individually with members of the California State Senate and Assembly to tell their life-saving stories and deliver important first-

hand information regarding the essential service provided by California’s private sector ambulance services.

The day’s festivities wrapped up with an awards dinner during which EMS Directory, Dr. Howard Backer and Assemblymember Freddie Rodriguez, who served 29 years as an EMT in the San Gabriel Valley, addressed the award recipients. *

- **Samuel Blesse** of Sierra Medical Services Alliance in Quincy
- **Roger Brown** of Liberty Ambulance in Ridgecrest
- **Jason Bryant** of Medic Ambulance Service, Inc. in Solano
- **James Bugai** of Medic Ambulance Service, Inc. in Solano
- **Sheri Cashman** of Schaefer Ambulance in Pomona
- **Justin Cloyd** of Mercy Medical Transportation in Mariposa
- **Edward Cordova** of Hall Ambulance Service, Inc. in Bakersfield
- **Micah Dayoan** of Medic Ambulance Service, Inc. in Solano
- **William Dietz** of Hall Ambulance Service, Inc. in Bakersfield
- **Curtis Dunn** of American Ambulance in Hanford



Chair of the Board, Richard Angotti and Executive Director, Ross Elliott

Continued on page 7

Member News

Continued from page 6

- **Kimberly Hartke** of Medic Ambulance Service, Inc. in Solano
- **Cliff Henderson** of Medic Ambulance Service, Inc. in Solano
- **Adam Hibdon** of Riggs Ambulance Service in Merced
- **Michelle Kasfeldt** of San Luis Ambulance Service in Paso Robles
- **Andrew Kiser** of Hall Ambulance Service, Inc in Bakersfield
- **Richard Kyle** of Liberty Ambulance in Ridgecrest
- **Armando Lazaro** of Hall Ambulance Service, Inc. in Bakersfield
- **Tim Meier** of Medic Ambulance Service, Inc in Solano
- **Tyler Morse** of Medic Ambulance Service, Inc. in Solano



Chair of the Board, Richard Angotti, Star of Life Award Recipient, Jane Williams, and Assemblyman Freddie Rodriguez

- **Walter Pesantes** of Schaefer Ambulance in Los Angeles
- **Tyler Rosser** of McCormick Ambulance in Hawthorne
- **Wayne Scoles** of Medic Ambulance Service, Inc. in Solano
- **Richard Selander** of West Side Ambulance in Patterson
- **Myron Smith** of Hall Ambulance Service, Inc. in Bakersfield
- **Makenzie Stevens** of Hall Ambulance Service, Inc. in Bakersfield
- **Christina Stoops** of Riggs Ambulance Service in Merced
- **Lori Valdovinos** of West Side Ambulance in Newman
- **Robert Wankel** of American Ambulance in Fresno
- **Annicka Welcker** of Medic Ambulance Service, Inc. in Solano
- **Tom Williams** of Sierra Ambulance Service, Inc. of Oakhurst
- **Jane Williams** of Sierra Ambulance Service, Inc. of Oakhurst



Star of Life Award Recipient, Walter Pesantes and Chair of the Board, Richard Angotti

An Update on California's UI Program

Chris Micheli | *CAA Legislative Advocate*

Now only \$8.7 billion owed to the feds – an update on California's UI Program

The Employment Development Department (EDD) administers the Unemployment Insurance (UI) program, which is financed by unemployment taxes that employers pay. It is intended to provide temporary financial assistance to unemployed workers who meet certain requirements. The UI fund deficit was \$9.9 billion at the end of 2012 and was roughly \$10.2 billion at the end of 2013.

The UI trust fund has been insolvent since 2009 and California has been in debt to the federal government ever since then. Beginning in January 2009, UI benefit payments to unemployed Californians exceeded available funds and so the state was required to obtain federal loans to continue the payment of UI benefits to recipients without any disruption.

The current federal balance is \$8.7 billion which is owed by the state and the employer

community. Employees do not pay into this fund. As explained by the California Legislative Analyst, for each year that the state carries a federal loan balance, the federal UI quarterly tax payments increase on employers, with those proceeds from these federal UI taxes being used to pay down the principal loan balance.

In addition, the state must make annual interest payments to the federal government on the loan. During the current fiscal year, the annual interest payment exceeds \$215 million of General Fund monies. According to the LAO, the federal loan balance is steadily declining and the LAO estimates full repayment to the federal government by 2019. Federal law requires that the interest payment come from state funds.

The federal loan balance only began to decrease two years ago as revenues to the UI trust fund finally exceeded the benefits being paid out to recipients. This decrease in the loan balance is primarily due to a decrease in benefits being paid out as the

economy has improved and there are fewer unemployed persons in this state, as well as the substantial increase in federal UI taxes being paid by California employers. These federal UI taxes per employee will continue to increase each year until the federal loan is paid back.

According to a report by the LAO to the Legislature in March, absent structural changes to the financing of the UI Program and benefits payable to recipients, the UI trust fund runs a high risk of becoming insolvent the next time a major recession hits the California economy. Basically, more money has to be paid into the fund, benefits paid out to unemployed persons have to be reduced, or a combination of the two must occur in order to prop up the UI trust fund.

The Administration convened a working group to examine proposals to address problems with the UI fund, but these stakeholder group meetings did not produce any reforms in either the financing or the benefits provisions of the UI program. *

The California Ambulance Association is now welcoming non-members to subscribe to the *Siren* magazine. Published quarterly, the *Siren* is a comprehensive source of information on issues that are important to the ambulance industry. Contents include feature articles, association educational and networking events, legislative updates and analysis, member news and much more.

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An Additional Hike in the Minimum Wage is Unwarranted

Chris Micheli | *CAA Legislative Advocate*



Senate Bill 3, authored by State Senator Mark Leno (D-San Francisco), would enact an unwarranted, additional hike in the state's minimum wage, similar to his measure last year, SB 935, which was opposed by CAA and was labeled a "Job Killer" by the California Chamber of Commerce. CAA is an active part of the opposition coalition against SB 3. California's minimum wage was just raised \$1 to \$9 per hour on July 1 of last year, well above the current \$7.25 per hour mandated under federal law.

Despite Governor Brown signing AB 10 (Alejo) in late 2013, which increases the state's minimum wage to \$10 an hour on January 1, 2015, SB 3 proposes to increase the minimum wage even higher to \$13 an hour by 2017 and,

thereafter, increase the wage according to the rate of inflation. Last year's SB 935 stalled in the Assembly policy committee after barely passing the State Senate. Hopefully this year's bill faces the same fate. SB 3 is currently pending on the Senate Floor. CAA has testified in opposition to the measure in the policy and fiscal committees.

SB 3's mandate will simply overwhelm many businesses that are already struggling with the current minimum wage increase and the myriad of other, cumulative costs imposed upon them in California. Moreover, automatically indexing the minimum wage to inflation, as SB 3 proposes, has always been troubling to the California business community because this provision fails to

take into consideration other economic factors and the cumulative costs to which employers may be subjected in the future.

Employers in California are already facing significant increased costs of doing business in this state over the next few years including increased personal income and sales taxes under Proposition 30, higher workers' compensation rates, a reduction in the federal unemployment insurance credit, higher energy costs, and increased costs due to the implementation of the Affordable Healthcare Act. There will undoubtedly be other costs employers are struggling with in 2019 when SB 3 seeks to tie the minimum wage increase to inflation. These unknown cost increases, coupled with an unknown economy at that time or thereafter, create concern and uncertainty for businesses.

Additionally, although California's economy is showing signs of improvement now, another increase in the minimum wage, after AB 10 just took effect, will negatively impact any economic recovery by either limiting available jobs or, worse, creating further job loss. California employers cannot absorb all of the costs and mandates imposed upon them and be forced to pay such a significant minimum wage increase as proposed by SB 3. Businesses will have to adjust costs in other areas, such as labor.

Notably, in February 2014, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) issued a report

Continued on page 10

Feature Article

Continued from page 9

regarding the impact of the proposal by President Obama to raise the federal minimum wage to \$10.10 an hour. The conclusion was that, although some low-wage workers would receive a higher income through the increased minimum wage hike, "some jobs for low-wage workers would probably be eliminated, the income of most workers who became jobless would fall substantially, and the share of low-wage workers who were employed, would probably fall slightly."

An increase in the minimum wage would not only increase hourly employees' wages, but also salaried employees' compensation. In order for employees to qualify as "exempt" under any of the six exemptions in California, they must meet the salary-basis test, which is two times the monthly minimum wage. If SB 3 is implemented, that amount in January

2017 will rise from the current annual salary of \$33,280 to at least \$49,920, which is an increase to employers of over \$15,000 per exempt employee.

Finally, an increase in the state's minimum wage also drives up workers' compensation costs, uniform/tool reimbursements, overtime, and ultimately consumer prices. These additional costs will significantly burden those companies that may not ordinarily pay minimum wage, yet will suffer a negative impact as a result of the proposed increase.

While we appreciate that some cities and counties in California may be able to afford an increased minimum wage as proposed by SB 3, other cities and counties are still struggling with an unemployment rate in

excess of 15%. Employers in these areas simply cannot sustain such a dramatic increase in costs. Instead, we should allow the provisions of last year's AB 10 to take full effect and examine the impact on the economy of this measure before revisiting another hike in California's minimum wage. It is for these reasons that CAA opposes SB 3. *



— Save the Date —

Celebrating the Past, Present and Future



67TH Annual Convention

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Member Feature Article



Del Norte Ambulance Stands the Test of Time



Ron Sandler can still recall that feeling in the pit of his stomach when the tone went off shortly after midnight, May 1, 1985.

He was working a regular shift at Del Norte Ambulance, the company he had officially purchased just minutes earlier. It was at that moment it really hit him ... he was 23 years old, and in charge.

“It was part excitement, and part fear,” Sandler said, 30 years later, still a paramedic and still the owner of the company, located in the far northwest corner of California. “To say the least, I was naïve to what it encompassed.”

Since that initial tone, Sandler has run thousands of calls himself, while his company has become well respected in the ambulance industry, always pushing to be better for the 28,000 residents living on the 1,230 square miles of Del Norte County.

But back then, the Southern Californian native was, as he now puts it, “in for a hell of a ride.”

“I didn’t know what I didn’t know,” he said. “I was wide-eyed and going to change the world.”

Both Sandler and the company have changed quite a bit. In 1985, it was a limited-ALS organization, with one station in Crescent City, with one crew on duty and another on call.

To make things work back then, Sandler would often be up for calls 24 hours a day, sometimes for a month at a time. He was living across the street from the company’s lone station, so when

a tone dropped, he would meet his partner at the unit and respond.

Two of the three units that came with the company were in fair condition, Sandler remembers. The back-up unit, on the other hand, was not exactly a showcase.

“You could see the pavement going by below the floor from all the rust,” he said.

During those first five years, Sandler estimates he ran around 40 percent of all the calls. The entire staff featured just six people in the field and one person in the office.

Today, three Advanced Life Support ambulances and crews respond to three- to four-times the call volume of 30 years past, from the station in Crescent City and another in the small village of Fort Dick in the northern part of the county. Three other ALS-equipped units serve as backups. The business features some 25 employees.

Today, his once dark hair is now rapidly graying, he carries reading glasses with him at all times and he no longer works regular shifts. However, he still maintains his paramedic license, filling in as needed and first responding in the company’s squad unit when appropriate.

During those early years, Sandler met and often treated many of the community’s residents, who liked his movie star good looks, ever-present mustache and his direct-but-friendly



Continued on page 12

Member Feature *Article*

Continued from page 11

manner. As his business expanded, Sandler was able to take a bigger role in the community. He joined a local volunteer fire department, served on the Del Norte Senior Center board, helped with the creation of the North Coast Marine Mammal Center, and was leading voice for community disaster planning.

It was also during this time he became involved in both the California Ambulance Association and the American Ambulance Association. He met many of the industry leaders, and tried to learn from each one. He lists his mentors, men like former CAA Executive Director David

Nevins, Harvey Hall of Hall Ambulance in Bakersfield, and EMS Consultant Steve Athey, an industry leader who grew up in Del Norte County.

“I have always sought to seek advice from great minds,” Sandler said. “I looked at men like David and Harvey, and I wanted to be like them ... when I grew up.”

“As an EMS consultant who observes ambulance companies throughout the country, I have learned there is almost nothing as difficult in this industry as operating an ambulance service with a massive coverage area with limited financial and personnel



resources,” said Athey, who actually worked at Del Norte Ambulance in the 1970s prior to Sandler’s purchase. “It is no small feat that Ron Sandler, through his leadership and hard work, has successfully managed to provide a quality, sustainable service for decades.”

Sandler is quick to share his success with his employees. His three-person management team all have been with the company a minimum of 15 years.

“He has always led with honesty and integrity,” said Operations Manager Charles Tweed, who moved into that position in 2001 from his paramedic post. “And because he won’t compromise my integrity, my job is much easier.”

Continued on page 13



What’s six-feet tall, furry, and is treated like a rock star by the young people of Del Norte County?



His name is **Rescue Raccoon**, and he is Del Norte Ambulance’s official mascot, visiting with children and adults, handing out hugs, handshakes and his message of being safe.

Created by Marylen Costume Design of Medford, Ore., Rescue dresses in a Del Norte Ambulance uniform, including

black boots, badges and patches. Ron Sandler established rules for Rescue. Rescue never talks, and never goes out without a friend – usually DNA General Manager John Pritchett, who along with delivering Rescue’s message (“This is Rescue Raccoon from Del Norte Ambulance, and he wants you to be safe!”) serves as Rescue’s eyes, making sure Rescue stays safe as well.

Another rule is that crewmembers never admit there is somebody “inside” of Rescue.

“Rescue is his own being,” Sandler said. “Nobody ever walks up and says ‘Who’s inside of you?’ “

The results were instantly positive. Small children flocked to Rescue from the very beginning, giving him high

fives and fist bumps. Parents often want photos of their youngsters posing with Rescue. Teen-age girls, for some reason, especially like to have their pictures taken with Rescue.

A few of the smallest children have been a little frightened by the sight of a giant raccoon walking on two legs, but most are eager to pet his fur and touch his mustache.

“There are times when some of the kids never want to let go,” said Sandler, who enjoys being “the heart” of Rescue. “Sometimes you think this is the only hug these children get.”

Rescue makes appearances at various functions, such as the Del Norte County Fair, local children’s events, and parades. He is also often invited to

Head Start programs and elementary schools, where Del Norte Ambulance personnel put on a 20-minute, high-energy show stressing staying safe at play, and the proper use of the 9-1-1 system.

Rescue has his own Facebook page, stickers and bookmarks, and children are given EMS coloring books as part of the presentation.

“Rescue has been a great investment,” Sandler said. “He is a star in our community, and gives Del Norte Ambulance a different, very positive image.”

“Best of all, I don’t pay him a lot. I give him a few carrots and Rescue is happy.” 🌸

Member Feature Article

Continued from page 12

“Ron has always been family oriented, family always came first,” said Denice Alvarado, who has served as office manager 24 years. “No matter whose family.”

“I’ve been graced with good people,” Sandler said. “I try not to micromanage, but I do let them know what I want. (The company) is my baby, and I will let you take my baby to the movies, but I want to know what the movie is and what time you will have her home.”

What has impressed Tweed the most is Sandler’s willingness to change. While some veteran paramedics he has worked with insist on doing things the old way, Tweed says Sandler is the opposite.

“He supports change,” Tweed said. “He is always pushing for new techniques that can be used in the field, he is always teaching us to think outside the box.”

Athey agrees.

“Ron Sandler has a thirst for knowledge and I have always been impressed with his curiosity for new and improved methods of providing quality ambulance services,” Athey said. “Even after thirty years he listens and learns about new concepts, always thinking ‘How can I provide that in Del Norte County?’”

Del Norte Ambulance has been a leader in the use of new technology, being first in the area to use bi-phasic defibrillators, EZ-IOs, and endocapnography, cutting-edge technology at the time. Today, Sandler is pushing hard for more evidence-based techniques and procedures, always seeking methods to improve outcomes for patients.

“Our goal has always been to be better than we were yesterday,” Sandler said. “We need to be flexible and adjustable to serve our community’s needs. I think we have stayed on the cutting edge for the size of our community.”

While Sandler no longer spends much time in the field, he does spend plenty of time in the boonies. Seven years ago, he became a wilderness paramedic, going out to wildland fire locations and providing emergency medical services for several weeks at a time. At age 53, Sandler finds himself hauling a full pack into remote areas, keeping up – and sometimes passing – much younger firefighters.

“It’s a great program and a good change of pace,” Sandler says. “I have seen some parts of the country I would have never otherwise seen. I am usually the old man, hiking along with a bunch of 18, 19, 20 year olds.”

And as much as he cares for his adopted community, the community cares for Sandler. He has been named the local Chamber of Commerce’s business leader of the year, honored as a “Friend of the Del Norte Fair” and has served as chairman on numerous local organizations, including

the community-based “Rural Human Services,” a private agency that does everything from economic development to food bank distribution to running the local women and children’s shelter.

“This community has supported me,” he said. “It’s been good to me. You can’t take that for granted.”

What’s next for Sandler? More of the same, which means, more changes. He is eager to see how community paramedicine can be implemented in Del Norte County. And he is always looking for new equipment and techniques to bring to the community.

“We have a great group of people, and I would like to believe we provide a great service to the community,” he said.

“I love the job, I love it every day. Even if I won some super mega-jackpot, I would still be doing this.” ❁

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