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Plan seeks to improve on 911 calls

By DAN SPRINGER | La Crosse Tribune

Tri-State Ambulance and Gundersen Lutheran Medical Center are asking

La Crosse County to make changes to the way medical emergency calls are handled and medical crews are dispatched.

When he addresses the county's Public Safety Communications Governing Board on Monday, Matt Zavadsky, director of Tri-State Ambulance, will ask the county to implement an Emergency Medical Dispatch operation.

By moving to an EMD operation,

people reporting a medical emergency would stay on the line with a specially trained dispatcher who would provide medical advice until first responders and paramedics arrive.

Jay Loeffler, administrator of the county's Emergency Services Department, said none of the county's dispatchers are certified EMD operators. That means dispatchers now take down information needed to send help, then end the call.

Zavadsky said an EMD system would provide life-saving medical advice to callers and "would cut response time to zero minutes because as soon as they call 911 they would be told what to do to help."

According to figures the county gave to Zavadsky, it would cost between \$150,000 to \$200,000 for the county's dispatch center to move to an EMD system.

But Zavadsky said Tri-State and Gundersen Lutheran are prepared to absorb the cost of starting and operating such a program.

"Tri-State and Gundersen (Lutheran) has done training and bought software, and we're offering that service to our primary 911 centers for free," Zavadsky said.

If approved, after taking the information needed to send first responders and Tri-State crews, the dispatcher would transfer the call to a trained Tri-State dispatcher who could then advise the caller on how to deal with the emergency until help arrives.

Although the program would cost \$150,000 to start and an extra \$90,000 a year to operate, Zavadsky said Tri-State and Gundersen Lutheran are willing to pay the price.

"It's the right thing to do," Zavadsky said.

Loeffler said the proposal has been in the very early talking stages for several months, but this is

the first time a formal proposal will be made to the county.

While he wants to wait until he hears the proposal, Loeffler said it's something the county should seriously consider.

"I know EMD is a great program, and I would love to have it here for our dispatchers. There are concerns — finances and staff has to come into play," Loeffler said. "But any time someone approaches us and can provide a higher level of service at no cost to us, we have to look into that further."

Another benefit to the program is that it would allow dispatchers to clinically evaluate the patient's condition and assign the appropriate level of care, Zavadsky said.

Currently in La Crosse County, first responders and ambulances respond to all medical calls with lights and sirens.

Zavadsky said that is an unsafe practice and should not be the case when responding to calls involving less serious medical conditions.

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, between 2003 and 2006, there were an average 13,500 accidents involving ambulances en route to emergency calls each year, Zavadsky said.

He added that having crews respond at a safer speed would only increase response times by an average 45 seconds per call.

The county's Public Safety Communications Governing Board meets at 10 a.m. Monday in the county's Administration Building.

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