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The last call of a 45-year career sounded outside the Putnam County Fire Station on Friday as members of Battalion 11 gathered to celebrate a county hero's retirement.

"It's been a heck of a ride," said Chief Steve Dennis, the man of the hour.

Dennis held his composure as his team radioed one last time from a county emergency vehicle.

"Putnam County Fire Patrol to ES 11. Battalion Chief Steve Dennis, the Putnam County Fire Rescue congratulates you on your retirement," an employee on the radio said.

"Thank you for over 45 years of dedicated service to your community. ... We will always remember your encouraging words: 'If you need me, call me. If you call me, need me.'"

Dennis started working in Palatka in the 1970s and has worked in most parts of the county during his time with emergency services, he said. The now-retired chief has been a part of the Southwest Volunteer Fire Department, the Palatka Fire Department and Putnam County Fire Rescue Services.

"(Dennis) was the very first one, along with me, to come over and start Putnam County Fire Rescue," EMS/Fire Chief Quin Romay said. "I'll never forget ... the first day. ... We both looked at each other and said, 'Now what do we do?' I think we had three rescue units in the whole county."

The station continued to grow from three ambulances at the 1992 founding to nine ambulances today.

"(He) was an instrumental part in getting this started. We all owe him a great bit of appreciation," Romay said.

Dennis said during his career he only took one year off from working with emergency services but was still a volunteer firefighter while he was gone.

Dennis' team presented him with a plaque Friday thanking him for his years served and the numerous pieces of wisdom he gave the team.

"It's been a big part of my life," Dennis said. "It's a good but sad day. It's a day I've been looking forward to, but it's also a day of reflection."

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