

Harvard Ambulance Service reports record call volume as it celebrates 50 years

BY AMANDA LARIVIERE · FRIDAY, JANUARY 28, 2022

When the Harvard Ambulance Service was founded in 1971, its mission was to provide emergency care 24 hours a day and 365 days a year to Harvard residents and visitors on their way to the hospital. While the faces of the volunteer emergency medical technicians have changed over the past 50 years, the mission remains the same.

“In 1971, emergency medical services was essentially brand new as a field,” said Jason Cotting, who got his EMT card in 2012 and is now the co-director of the Harvard Ambulance Service. “The ambulances they were running those days were more or less modified hearses. They looked like the ‘Ghostbusters’ car.”

The final ambulance-run statistics for 2021 revealed a record call volume as the service celebrated its 50th anniversary. “We had 417 calls last year,” said Cotting. “It wasn’t really driven by the pandemic, partially because in the first wave of the pandemic Harvard was practically spared.” Cotting said construction on Route 2 and wet roads contributed to many of the calls the ambulance service received. There were 178 calls for traumatic injuries, and 115 of them were associated with motor vehicle accidents.

Currently, the Harvard Ambulance Service has about 30 volunteers who are paid when they staff an ambulance call. Cotting said members receive approximately \$42 after each call from the Ambulance Enterprise Fund, which is financed by ambulance billing receipts. Last year, \$40,054.69 was expended on member stipends.

Jason Cotting, co-director of the Harvard Ambulance Service. (Photo by Lisa Aciukewicz)

The ambulance service has one paid full-time employee, Lt. Andrew Perry, who is shared with the Harvard Fire Department. “Demographically, we’re a very different town than we were in 1971,” said Cotting. Since fewer people both live and work in

Harvard, Cotting said, “It’s difficult to find people who can drop what they’re doing and run an ambulance call in the middle of the day.” Lt. Perry, working as an EMT and a firefighter, serves as a buffer.

Peter Warren, chief of the Harvard Fire Department from 1996 to 2004, was on the original committee appointed by the Select Board to start the ambulance service in 1971. “We were one of the first groups in Massachusetts to have a radio system with direct contact to an emergency room,” Warren said, recalling how dispatch methods have transformed.

Warren volunteered for the ambulance service from 1971 to 1982 and said it was exciting to be part of the original squad. “We had one person that went on a call with me, and he was sitting in the front seat and said, ‘I don’t know what I’m going to do, I’m scared of the sight of blood,’” Warren said. “The gentleman was excellent on the call though.” On another call, Warren was in the middle of transporting a patient who had a heart attack, when one of the EMTs had a heart attack. The director of the ambulance service was contacted and was asked to meet them on the side of the road for additional assistance.

In the past, the ambulance service conducted a program that allowed Bromfield students to complete an EMT basic training program and respond to medical emergencies along with service personnel. The waiver from the Massachusetts Office of Emergency Medical Services, which is required for this program to take place, was canceled last year. Cotting said the service has not yet decided whether to pursue the waiver this year.

Thanking the EMTs for their work during the pandemic, Cotting said, “This is a tough time to be an EMT, and our members have continued to step up and serve their community despite that.”

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