

Dividends to community inspired crew

BY SUSAN E. LINDT
Intelligencer Journal Staff

The paperwork was horrendous. The effort and cost, monumental. The office Siamese fighting fish might have been the only one not interviewed. But the payoff is a delight.

Of the nation's 13,500 ambulance services, Lancaster's LEMSAs is now one of only 99 to earn a coveted nod from the Commission on Accreditation of Ambulance Services.

The accreditation means LEMSAs, a system of about 145 paid and 30 volunteer emergency medical personnel, is using the gold standard of care and practice when responding to medical emergencies.

"By achieving this, we have established a new minimum standard for ourselves. We have a higher bar now," said C. Robert May, executive director of Lancaster Emergency Medical Services Association.

But it didn't come easily. Staff members worked for nine months to prove their practices are among the finest, compiling a foot-high stack of bound information for submission to the commission for review and shaping up their shops for commission inspections.

The commission considered everything in the decision, from LEMSAs's relationship to the community and local press, to hiring and training procedures, to finances, to examining how complaints and compliments are handled.

The application alone cost LEMSAs \$20,000, and payment doesn't ensure accreditation by the commission. But May saw the process as a means of measuring LEMSAs's standards against the best. And May thought with LEMSAs's roots as a hospitals-based organization, it was poised to get the accreditation.

"We were at a good starting point to try

Please see **AMBULANCE** page **B2**

Ambulance: *Dividends*

Continued from **B1**

for it," May said. "It was important to me and our board of directors to achieve the highest standard possible to compare ourselves against. It really doesn't make any sense to just compare ourselves against ourselves."

Just days after finding out LEMSAs had earned the three-year accreditation, the commission issued one of many standard operating procedure announcements to come. As an accredited organization, LEMSAs must put into practice all those new standards or risk losing the accreditation.

And in three years, LEMSAs must go through a less grueling but still rigorous reapplication process to keep the accreditation. But May said it's area residents who use LEMSAs services who reap the most benefit from the accreditation.

"They know they're getting the very best possible service from us," May said. "It's really the end users who benefit."

Steve Lyle, executive director of Emergency Health Services Federation Inc., an alliance of

regional ambulance services, said LEMSAs is the first in the group of 220 ambulance member organizations to earn the accreditation. However, many ambulance services simply don't have the resources to seek accreditation.

"It's a dollar well spent," Lyle said. "It's a great thing. But you have to have a pretty significant management team to pull together what needs to be pulled together to develop these policies (to get accreditation). LEMSAs has done that, but the average service provider does not have that."

Ambulance service providers are annually stretched further to respond to more calls without the benefit of bigger budgets. Still, Lyle hopes LEMSAs's accreditation will help other ambulance services continue to aim for excellence in spite of shrinking budgets.

"Just because you don't have this accreditation doesn't mean you're substandard," he said. "It really means that LEMSAs went above and beyond, and it's something for the other organizations to shoot for. Hopefully, this will spur some competition."