WHAT IS EMS?

Emergency Medical Services (EMS) is a specially organized system that provides personnel, facilities and equipment for the effective and coordinated delivery of emergency medical services within a geographical area. An effective EMS system involves many different agencies and organizations working together to provide rapid emergency medical response, treatment and transport to those in need of immediate medical attention. Agencies responsible for providing EMS include dispatch centers, public safety agencies, fire departments, ambulance services, hospitals and specialty care centers.

In California, EMS systems are organized on a county or regional basis. The Local EMS Agency (LEMSA), is the lead agency responsible for local EMS system planning and coordination, consistent with State laws and regulations. The State EMS Authority (EMSA) approves local EMS system plans, provides guidance to LEMSAs, develops EMS regulations, administers the Regional Poison Control Center program and carries out other EMS related activities. The State EMS Commission, with members appointed by the Governor and other state officials, is an advisory board to EMSA and reviews and approves all EMS regulations.

In Alameda County, the Board of Supervisors designated the Public Health Department, a division of the Health Care Services Agency, as the Local EMS Agency (Figure 1-B). The County Health Officer is responsible for the medical aspects of EMS. As allowed in law, the County Health Officer has delegated this responsibility to the EMS Medical Director. The Alameda County EMS Agency carries out the functions of EMS under the direction of the EMS Director. Several advisory committees appointed by the Board of Supervisors meet regularly to provide advice on EMS matters to the Board and the EMS Agency.

LOCAL EMS AGENCY FUNCTIONS

The principal functions of a Local EMS Agency are defined in the Health and Safety Code (Division 2.5). These include the planning, implementation and evaluation of emergency medical services via:

- Monitoring and approving EMT-I, paramedic and Mobile Intensive Care Nurse (MICN) training programs.
- Certifying EMT-Is and accrediting paramedics and MICNs.
- Authorizing advanced life support programs.
- Establishing policies and procedures for medical control of the EMS system, including dispatch, patient destination, patient care and quality improvement.
- Establishing exclusive operating areas for the regulation of ambulance services.
- Establishing and monitoring contracts with EMS system providers including, fire departments, ambulance transport agencies, trauma centers and base hospitals.
- Developing, implementing and monitoring a trauma system plan.
- Planning and coordinating disaster medical response.
EMS services are typically provided in response to a medical emergency reported through the 9-1-1 system. A 9-1-1 call placed from any telephone is automatically routed to the appropriate designated Public Safety Answering Point (PSAP). There are 18 PSAPs in Alameda County operated by law enforcement agencies. A police dispatcher determines the nature of the emergency (police assistance, fire suppression or medical assistance) and either dispatches the appropriate personnel or transfers the caller to a medical dispatcher. All 9-1-1 cellular phone calls are routed to the California Highway Patrol dispatch center in Vallejo.

In the majority of the county if medical assistance is needed, the caller is transferred to a trained Emergency Medical Dispatcher. At this point, the nature of the medical emergency is determined, the call is prioritized as emergent or non-emergent, appropriate personnel and equipment are dispatched and prearrival instructions are given, if appropriate. There are three Emergency Medical Dispatch (EMD) Centers: Alameda County Sheriffs Department, Fremont Fire Department and Oakland Fire Department. Four cities within the county currently do not offer EMD to the caller.

The initial response to a potentially life threatening incident includes both fire and ambulance personnel. The location of fire stations throughout the county enables fire fighters to make a rapid initial response. Basic Life Support (BLS) Fire personnel responding to emergencies are trained at the EMT-I level, with the exception of the City of Oakland where most of the responders are trained to the First Responder level. BLS personnel function under a scope of practice established in regulations (Title 22, Chapters 1.5 and 2), approved by the EMS Authority and policies and procedure developed by the EMS Agency. Twelve fire departments in the County also respond a paramedic on the first-in fire engine.

Ambulance response is provided by the Albany Fire Department, Berkeley Fire Department and Piedmont Fire Department within their cities, and American Medical Response - West for the remaining areas. All ambulances are staffed by two licensed paramedics and are required to respond to the scene in ten minutes or less. Paramedics function under a scope of practice established in regulations (Title 22, Chapter 4) approved by the EMS Authority and policies and procedure developed by the EMS Agency. Paramedics utilize these policies and procedures as guidelines and must always function within their scope of practice.

Medical care delivered by paramedics in the field is accomplished primarily through standing orders, however, some medications or procedures require the paramedic to contact the base hospital physician for consultation. Unstable patients are taken to the closest most appropriate hospital, which may include a receiving hospital, trauma center, burn center or pediatric facility. Stable patients may be taken to the facility of their choice. There are a total of twelve receiving hospital; three of which are trauma centers, three are base hospitals and two are burn centers. Medical helicopter service is available from several different providers, including ALS air ambulance, ALS rescue aircraft and BLS rescue aircraft.