



# Copper Valley Emergency Services

**"T**hank you for serving others in their time of need."

Those words are penned on the dry erase board inside the Glennallen ambulance barn. They are written there to thank volunteers and remind them of the reason behind their efforts.

The communities in the Copper Valley rely almost entirely on volunteers to meet their needs in the event of an emergency. Whether residents are faced with fire or serious medical emergencies, it is volunteers who answer their plea for help.

Emergency medical services—including emergency response, ambulance transport, medivac assistance, and patient care—are provided through Copper River Emergency Medical Services (CREMS).

Incorporated in 1981, CREMS is a nonprofit organization that took "neighbor helping neighbor" to the next level. The CREMS service area covers 23,000 square miles, or 500 road miles from Eureka to Glennallen on the Glenn Highway, North to Paxson and west to roughly mile 42 on the Denali Highway,

back to Glennallen, and northeast on the Tok Cutoff to Slana; south to mile 47 on the Richardson Highway, then down the Edgerton Highway to Chitina and beyond.

Although the organization has ambulances in Kenny Lake, Glennallen and Copper Center, and trained responders in Chitina, this is a huge area to cover, especially when time is a critical factor.

CREMS has about 15 active responders who answer roughly 130 to 150 ambulance calls a year. Common types of ambulance calls include medical emergencies such as alcohol-related injuries, heart problems, breathing problems and trauma related to motor vehicle accidents.

CREMS volunteers work closely with the volunteer fire departments and are at times, dispatched to structure fires. At a structure fire, responders treat the injured, and check vital signs and the general condition of the firefighters to determine when and if they are OK to get back to fighting the fire.

Because CREMS provides the equipment and training responders

need to perform emergency medical services, funding is critical. Funding for the organization comes from grants from the Southern Region Emergency Medical Services Council, which receives funding from the state of Alaska. Funding also comes from the CREMS Annual Radio Auction.

This year the auction raised more than \$12,000. Proceeds will be used to replace the 22-year-old ambulance used by the Copper Center squad.

Operations revenue comes from ambulance services provided.

Volunteer training is an essential component of CREMS. The state of Alaska sets the curriculum and standards that must be met.

Volunteers want people to know the training is "totally doable." Anyone with a desire can pass the training. A mentoring program keeps volunteers from feeling like they are "on their own."

Volunteers can drive the ambulance, become an emergency trauma technician (ETT), or an emergency medical technician (EMT).

Every call should include a driver,

an ETT and an EMT. To make this happen, more volunteers are needed.

Becoming an ETT requires a 40-hour course. EMT takes 120 hours.

Mike Moody has been an EMT since 1992. He is a responder in Chitina and the CREMS instructor.

Moody and the CREMS organization make every attempt to fit classes into volunteers' busy schedules.

On May 3, many volunteers attended annual medivac training in combination with Cross Road Medical Center and a Providence "Lifeguard" team. Attendees were trained on the proper way to approach a medivac helicopter and load an injured person into the helicopter.

Volunteers can choose their level of participation. According to Bill Bowler, a responder since 1981, volunteers can participate in many ways.

"In addition to providing medical services, the organization can use volunteers to serve on the board of directors, provide vehicle maintenance, taking inventory, fund-raising, and training and instruction."

"If everyone does a little, together we can meet the needs of everyone," says Karen Pregizer, a responder for three years.

Dave Abbot, CREMS administrator/coordinator, wants people to know "volunteering for CREMS isn't a 24-hour-a-day job, and it doesn't have to take over one's life."

With more volunteers, the workload can be spread out. This is why there is an emphasis on recruitment, training and retention.

"It is critical for the service to be available, and we need more people trained and ready to respond when able," Bowler says.

In some cases involving motor vehicle accidents, volunteers from the local volunteer fire department are on scene to assist. Volunteer firefighters support CREMS with extrication services. Two units respond to motor vehicle accidents when extrication is needed.

Some firefighters and EMS volunteers are cross trained, which helps both organizations.

Recently, several area service agen-



*Above left, medivac training teaches volunteers how to work with helicopter crews. Photo by Sharon Crisp. Above right, Pinky Becker mans a hose during fire training. Photo by Donna Catledge. Opposite page, volunteers practice transporting a patient. Photo by Donna Catledge. Cover photo by Mitch Cox.*



cies collaborated on a huge training exercise that simulated structure fires, rescue and medical services.

In the case of fire, volunteer firefighters from one of several fire departments will come to the rescue. Fire departments operate in Kenny Lake, Gakona and Chitina.

Several departments—including Tolsona, Glennallen, Tazlina, Silver Springs and Copper Center—combined to form the Glenn-Rich Fire/Rescue Department.

All departments have mutual aid agreements, which eliminates borders, when necessary, and allows anyone to respond to whoever is in need. If additional trucks or water is needed, departments from surrounding communities are called in to assist.

According to Mike Thomas, Glenn-Rich fire chief and a volunteer since 1990, the Glenn-Rich Fire/Rescue Department has approximately 30 volunteers, but "can never have too many."

While 30 may seem like a lot, with busy lives some volunteers are often not available to take calls, leaving the department shorthanded.

Thomas stresses experience is not necessary. Training officers are available, and a lot of opportunities exist to participate in exercises and hands-on training.

Because responding to a fire can be dangerous, the Glenn-Rich Fire/Rescue Department believes in continuous training. It address-

es any needs or requests for additional training until a volunteer is comfortable.

"Volunteers will never be asked to do something they don't feel comfortable doing," says Thomas.

Much like CREMS, the Copper Valley volunteer fire departments have many needs, and not all involve fighting fires.

Other opportunities include assisting firefighters on the scene with food and water, providing heat resources on the scene during winter fires, driving fire engines and water tanks, helping track volunteers on scene, handling administration tasks and fund-raising.

Asked why they spend their time away from their families, why they respond time after time, year after year, all of the volunteers said they do it because there is a need in their community.

Bowler says the highlight for him is "having the opportunity to be helpful, so that an emergency might have a positive outcome."

According to Thomas, "Nothing is better than helping someone in need. There is no better reward." ■

*To find out more about how you can participate in either organization, please contact CREMS, Dave Abbot, P.O. Box 529, Glennallen, AK 99588, (907) 822-3671, [crems@cvinternet.net](mailto:crems@cvinternet.net); Glenn-Rich Fire/Rescue Department, Mike or Jackie Thomas, (907) 822-3415; Chuck Thomas, (907) 822-3562.*