

## Peninsula Ambulance Corps

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*Melissa Varnum*

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*Carolyn Brouillard*

*Erin Effron*

*Tom Gutow*

*Dwayne Lee Philbrook*

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## *Inside the Peninsula Ambulance Corps*

How does Peninsula Ambulance Corps (PAC) actually work? Fortunately for Blue Hill Peninsula patients, the emergency services PAC performs bear little resemblance to historical “emergency services,” in which simple carts were used to transport incurable patients. Advances in technology have replaced carts with modern vehicles staffed with skilled emergency responders. Here on the peninsula, PAC is available around the clock, and responders are highly trained. No carts needed!

The morning shift at PAC headquarters in Blue Hill begins with a 7:00 a.m. meeting to catch up on overnight issues and to discuss the upcoming day’s scheduled hospital runs. Before ending their shifts and filing their report, the night crew will have checked the ambulance gas tank, inspected all equipment onboard, and restocked supplies. If there were nighttime runs, routine maintenance will have included disinfection of the stretcher and straps after each use.

Four-, eight-, and twenty-four-hour shifts are scheduled weekly and are staggered to accommodate two crews and designed to give EMTs flexibility, an opportunity to work side-by-side with a variety of other EMTs, and time away to “regroup.” During down time, crew members study for upcoming licensing tests, do routine housekeeping chores in the facility, perform weekly prescribed cleaning of the vehicles, or relax.

When a call comes from Hancock County Regional Communications

Center (the people who answer 911 calls), crew members exit the building within two minutes (four minutes at night). The crew manning each ambulance consists of a paramedic paired with a second EMT—either another paramedic or an EMT on a lower license level. EMTs and paramedics differ in the amount of training each has received and in the scope of duties allowed for each license level. An EMT can give oxygen or administer a nasal inhaler, but a paramedic has the additional training to determine which medicines are required for the specific event and to inject drugs or establish an airway.

Understandably, PAC receives fewer calls than larger areas such as Ellsworth, but the ambulances stay busy with traffic accidents, falls, breathing problems, strokes, cardiac issues, and inter-hospital patient transfers—a peninsula-wide service that only PAC provides. In 2015 PAC responded to 630 Blue Hill calls, as well as calls from Penobscot (124), Castine (90), Sedgwick (83), Brooksville



*Cody and Missy Varnum check the schedule*

(52), Brooklin (51), and Surry (48). Areas primarily served by other ambulance companies (Bucksport, Deer Isle, Ellsworth, Orland, and Stonington) added another 134 calls, bringing 2015's total to 1,212 calls—an average of more than three calls per 24-hour period.

PAC is proud of its record of “doing things right,” and credits its dedicated employees and a succession of excellent, exacting medical directors who demand high standards and stay in constant touch with procedures and performance, while taking a personal interest in patient care. Medical directors are not a standard resource for ambulance companies, so PAC greatly values and appreciates the doctors who have chosen to share their skills.

Manager Geoff Miller, who joined PAC in 1986 and has led its operation for 19 years, says of emergency service, “It is as much a calling as it is a job. We who began in the volunteer days did so with the idea of improving conditions and adding value to our community. Today this work is a career. But, regardless of the motivation, the work is often hard with long and unpredictable hours, so it requires a special individual to go to work on Monday morning not knowing what

hour, or even what day, they might go home. PAC is fortunate to have people with that level of dedication.”

In the end, it is PAC's 24 trained, dedicated emergency responders—13 EMPTs (paramedics), 4 AEMTs (advanced), and 7 EMTs (basic) that make the program what it is. Emergency service providers offer many reasons for choosing the profession, including, “It's never routine—no day is the same”; “It's challenging—there's always more to learn”; and “It's fun—we work as a team.” PAC staffers also say, “It matters!—to every person who calls, you matter.” Personalities vary and skills differ within PAC, but as experienced Paramedic Theresa Cousins says, “We may disagree on other subjects, but when there's an emergency, we work seamlessly for the patient's positive outcome. On a call, differences evaporate!”

PAC has continuously evolved and honed its skills as an organization over the 50 years of its existence. We're proud of our record and our high standards, and our commitment to maintaining these things for our and your community. We pledge to continue that service in the years to come.

## *Letter from the President*

Here's a new perspective after my eight years leading the PAC Board of Directors: I have always had a clear grasp of the importance of what we do. Recently I experienced a close-up of what that means through the eyes of a patient whom I know well and see frequently. He told me, “your guys saved my life.” He had contracted a serious respiratory virus that had him struggling to maintain consciousness. He was simply not able to breathe in a life-sustaining measure. He described it as “like drowning in the open air.” I felt a hint of panic myself, listening to him.

Beyond their giving oxygen, I have no idea what the PAC responders did, but I do know that very quickly they had the patient's confidence that whatever was needed, they were up to the task. He believed in them. And in so doing, he believed in himself.

That bond between patient and paramedic has much in common with the bond PAC strives to maintain with the towns and people of the peninsula.

It is not enough for you to know that our staff provides a level of skill and dedication that is exemplary among its sister services.

State and federal governments contract the majority of our services and pay between 45% and 72% of the costs. We at the local level must have the insight and the determination to make the service whole. If this service is to continue in the face of increasing challenges, then you, the public, and we, the board of directors, must face them as one.



To learn more about PAC, visit us at [www.peninsulaems.org](http://www.peninsulaems.org), where you can now donate online. Our web site is a work in progress, and we welcome your suggestions and comments to make it ever more useful.