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Ambulance Corps**

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Paint it Black

PAC completed 2022 operating in the black by a thin margin. It was a good feeling... accompanied by a nervous eye looking back over our collective shoulder. The year 2022 had shifts where we were unable to muster sufficient staff to operate a second ambulance when scheduled. Balancing the budget is not an unqualified success if we haven't met operations goals to achieve it. Simply put, we needed more people on staff. It could be a combination of full time and part time positions that make a full roster, so long as they have the skills, the certifications and that special dedication to the cause.

There are people who are drawn to this calling but have not made a commitment to it. It is a demanding discipline that requires rigorous training. In the forefront of that decision making process is a threshold question: will the pay scale adequately support self and family. Imagine, if you can, making the commitment to the calling and then discovering over time that the pay simply won't support a family. That difficult judgement is faced by emergency personnel nationwide every day. How those decisions are made has a substantial influence on the quality, even the availability, of emergency medical services.

PAC's 2023 request from the seven Peninsula towns for support of the operations portion of our budget was increased by \$1.50 per capita. We have committed that entire amount to increasing current staff compensation and to hiring additional staff. With that support, operations manager Alan Henschke's insights and efforts in recruiting and your unwavering contributions, we are now able to staff and operate nearly all scheduled coverage.

Staffing level is still below our need at the paramedic level to provide the target level of service for all units on call. We still need stronger focus on that level of recruitment... and its funding. That issue is nationwide.

I share this information so that you may have a real sense of the benefit that comes from your support. You are knit into the fabric of the process. The contributions that we receive from the community are an essential part of our maintaining a strong forward momentum. Your demonstration of support on our behalf also inspires energy in our board and staff.

Attached you will find an article from the *Weekly Packet* and *Castine Patriot* which gives a good sense of where we are. It is an echo of the dynamic driven by the board. I feel compelled to add a substantial measure of credit to Alan Henschke and Scott Parsons, who have assembled a very good staff... and to that full and part time staff who carry the ball with an energy and professionalism that bring us frequent letters of appreciation from riders and families.

In a world that seems full of controversy and challenge, I am honored to be associated with such an organization and with you, our anchors in the community.



Robert Vaughan, President
Peninsula Ambulance Corps



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To learn more about PAC, visit us at
www.peninsulaems.org,
where you can now donate online.

NEWS FEATURE

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Peninsula Ambulance Corps finally in the black

Board confident in community support

by Will Robinson

“It’s not our ambulance service, it’s yours” is the phrase Bob Vaughan, president of the Peninsula Ambulance Corps board of directors, uses to describe the organization’s guiding philosophy. In the Corps’ annual appeal letter, he proudly announced that the organization has, “by the barest margin,” been in the black for the past two years.

According to Vaughan, the accomplishment is the result of strong community support and sound business planning from a capable board of directors. Despite its recent success at balancing the budget, PAC announced in its 2022 Annual Report to the Towns that its biggest challenges going forward will be managing the budget as inflation raises costs, and paying better wages to its hardworking EMTs and paramedics.

The ambulance service operates out of the Blue Hill Fire Department, with three ambulances running 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. The Corps has around 21 full-time and part-time employees working 12-hour shifts to cover seven towns across the Peninsula. According to Chief of Service Alan Henschke, when a call comes in, the ambulance is geared up and out the door in two minutes.

Staff wages and inflation

In its 2022 report, Peninsula Ambulance Corps stated, “We simply must pay our people what they are worth if we are to keep them.” This year, the Corps’ funding request, made to all of the towns in its coverage area, has risen by about \$2 per capita compared to last year. According to Vaughan, the increase will go completely to raising staff pay.

The board is confident that PAC can rely on its positive relationship with the towns and the people it serves to keep operations running as well as they have been.

“It’s an issue that is going to become increasingly critical and the state is going to have to step up. The towns probably will have to step up to a greater extent, and we of course count heavily on private donors,” Vaughan said.

Henschke has been head of operations for the past five years and has been dealing with the issue of rising costs and staff shortages since the beginning. Recently, he said, the cost of everything from basic medical supplies to new ambulances and specialized equipment has risen, stressing an already narrow budget.

“We know what our income is, we know what the revenue is and we have to live within that,” said Henschke.

The starting wage of a PAC EMT or paramedic varies based on training and experience, but is usually \$15 to \$20 an hour. Many PAC employees have to work other jobs or own their own businesses just to stay afloat. Because of the shortage of staff, the Corps relies on overtime to get shifts covered.

“This is not a living wage that we can afford to pay, and it’s every service facing this,” said Cass Migel, PAC’s director of development.

The board does, according to Migel, put significant effort into increasing the “quality of life” of its staff members. The ambulance station is equipped with a kitchen, lounge area, televisions, bedrooms and high-speed broadband internet for the staff to use. PAC crews not physically out in the ambulance have time free to sleep, eat, manage other work or do any other task, as long as it may be stopped at a moment’s notice when a call comes in.

Health insurance is also fully funded for staff, as well as the cost of continuing education and qualifications required for their positions.



From left, Bob Vaughan, president of the Peninsula Ambulance Corps board of directors, Cass Migel, Director of Development, and Alan Henschke, Chief of Service.

Photo by Will Robinson

“We have worked very hard since I’ve been here to increase staff payment. It helps retention, but it’s what they deserve,” said Henschke.

According to Vice President and Director of Finance Richard Marshuetz, the biggest barrier to increasing wages and dealing with inflation is the way in which PAC is funded.

“Our expenses are fixed, our income is not,” explained Migel.

PAC receives funding from a combination of sources: reimbursement from insurance companies, funding from town governments, and private donations.

Reimbursement

About 60 percent of PAC’s income comes from insurance companies reimbursing the organization for the calls it responds to. Because of the average age of the population, explained Marshuetz, most of the billing goes through Medicaid and Medicare, but PAC receives less than half of what it bills. For every dollar the nonprofit service bills the federal government or private insurance company, it gets back only about 48 cents in reimbursement, according to PAC’s report to the towns.

“In an urban area, the reimbursement might cover it, but for us it doesn’t even come close,” said Marshuetz.

If someone is transported in a PAC ambulance but does not have insurance, they are billed directly. According to Henschke, most patients who don’t have insurance are directed toward the state-funded MaineCare for coverage. There are times when PAC must work with the patient to work out a payment schedule.

Town funding

Every town PAC serves is charged the same per-capita rate based on the most recent census. This year, for example, PAC requested a donation of \$26.50 per head to each town to cover the expenses not addressed through reimbursement.

The town funding is not a guarantee, but without it PAC would have to close its doors. Vaughan, Henschke and the rest of the board have had to develop a relationship with each of the town governments to ensure that the all-important funding continues.

“You need advocacy from the word go,” said Vaughan

Despite the challenge of dealing with seven town governments, Vaughan is confident that the ambulance service’s relationship with the towns and with the public is, overall, a positive one.

“Every member of our board of directors is an effective ambassador to the public at large,” Vaughan said.

Private donations

As for donations, Migel said PAC has a strong connection with the 5,000 or so people on its mailing list. A letter of appeal is sent to donors in the early summer, and a newsletter—complete with a wish list of new equipment PAC needs—is sent out in late fall.

PAC receives donations that usually include a heartfelt letter or stories explaining how PAC aided a loved one or community member. According to Marshuetz, the donations not only fill gaps in funding but also allow the Corps to have a dialogue with the people they help.

“All the towns, the 10,000 or so people on our peninsula, see those ambulances. They have experience with either themselves or loved ones or neighbors where the ambulance did its job and served them well. Without that, none of the rest of it would matter,” he said.

Looking forward

The board and the management expressed their deepest gratitude for the level of trust they have built with area towns in the last decade. Vaughan said that the Peninsula Ambulance Corps has seen rough times but has managed to build first a capable board of directors and then a relationship with its community.

“Ten years ago we had a substantial deficit every year... We had to do something about it. We generated a board of directors which was very capable over that period of time,” he said

The PAC board is pivoting to prioritize living wages and face rising inflation rates. Vaughan feels that the board has the vital expertise and community support to adapt to what the future holds.