

City considers adding paramedic services

Written by Kristyn Halbig Ziehm
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Commission agrees to study feasibility of having Port become second county community to offer specialized care

The City of Port Washington could become the second Ozaukee County community to offer paramedic services.

The Police and Fire Commission on Monday agreed to study expanding the city's ambulance service to include paramedic services as soon as next year.

A paramedic program, currently offered only by the Village of Thiensville, could be largely self-supporting while increasing the service provided by the Port department to area residents, city officials said.

"It's certainly an idea worth exploring," commission member Gina Taucher said.

"It would bring us to the next level," Commission Chairman Rick Nelson said in an interview Tuesday. "Right now, it makes a lot of sense for us to consider it.

"I think it's perfect for the city. It's awfully nice we've been able to call in Thiensville's paramedic unit, but it would be great to have paramedics here, too. We would be able to handle the northern suburbs a lot easier than Thiensville."

Fire Chief Mark Mitchell, who called Monday's meeting a "very initial discussion," said the time has come for the city to consider upgrading its emergency services to include paramedics.

"I think this is something the community would benefit from," Mitchell said. "The paramedic program has proven itself since the 1970s. There is a demand for it."

Last year, Mitchell said, the Port Washington ambulance called for aid from the Thiensville paramedics five times. Medical protocols dictate when the Thiensville paramedics are called to an emergency scene or to meet an ambulance en route to the hospital.

But the skills of a paramedic would have come in handy at other times as well, including times when a patient's condition changes while on the way to the hospital, Mitchell said.

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The Port Washington ambulance, like virtually all its counterparts in Ozaukee County, is certified as emergency medical technician-intermediate, one step below a paramedic unit.

Both EMTs and paramedics provide significant care for patients, but paramedics are able to conduct more advanced procedures and administer many more medications, including those for pain and cardiac care, Mitchell said.

Cardiac care is probably the area in which paramedics make the biggest difference, he said.

“We all know time is of the essence in these cases,” he said. “Right now, we’re basically limited to securing an airway, doing CPR and defibrillation if it’s indicated.”

Paramedics, who spend hours of training for cardiac cases, can also use medications to treat these patients, and that makes a big difference in their care, Mitchell said.

He predicted the cost of beginning a paramedic program in Port would be relatively minimal. The biggest cost in starting a program is generally the heart monitor/defibrillator, which Port already has, although it would require a software upgrade for specific heart-pacing treatments.

Some of the medications that would be used may be expensive, but that cost would be reimbursed as the drugs are used, he said.

Staffing is often cited as a concern for departments, but Mitchell said, Port already has three EMTs who are certified paramedics and two others who are nearing the end of their training.

Even though these members have paramedic certification, they cannot operate as paramedics in Port because the ambulance service isn’t a paramedic program, he noted.

There are also a number of paramedics are looking for part-time employment to supplement their regular work on other ambulance services or who haven’t found a job in the field, Mitchell said, and Port could tap them to staff its program.

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“We’ve got them knocking on our door, people looking for part-time employment. The availability of these people is incredible,” he said.

“I think we’re in a position where we could bring our level of service up and offer this.”

Staffing problems, a perennial concern for volunteer ambulance services, might actually be eased with a paramedic program, Mitchell added, because of the number of part-time people available.

Although the Thiensville department contracts with individuals to pay for their paramedic training in return for service, Mitchell said he does not think this would be necessary in Port — at least not initially.

If Port were to approve a paramedic program, Mitchell said, one paramedic and one EMT would likely be required on each ambulance run.

Although the Police and Fire Commission is expected to appoint a committee to study the potential for a paramedic program when it meets in April — a study that would likely include specific recommendations on how a program would operate — Mitchell said he envisions paramedics as paid, on-call volunteers, just as firefighters and EMTs are now.

Although the department’s policy has been to require EMTs to live in the city, nonresident paramedics could be hired with the understanding that they remain in the city while on call, Mitchell said. An area of the fire station could be modified to allow nonresident members a place to stay while on call.

A paramedic program must be approved by the state Department of Health, which requires round-the-clock coverage. When the Thiensville program began five years ago, it phased in this coverage, starting with six hours a day and working up to a full-time program over two years.

But Mitchell said with the current and anticipated staffing, the city may be able to provide round-the-clock coverage from the start.

“We might want to ease into it,” he said. “Or we may be able to start it up full-time. It just depends on availability.”

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Although the department would pay the paramedics more than EMTs, that cost — as well as other costs for the program — would probably be recouped through increased fees for ambulance services, he added.

Next month, the commission will meet with LifeQuest, the private firm that handles billing and recommends fees for the city's ambulance service, and discuss the possible economic impact of a paramedic program.

The paramedic study committee expected to be appointed in April would likely take a couple months to complete its study. Mitchell said a recommendation could come from the group as soon as June.