California’s Emergency Ambulance Safety Net

Vital statistics about California’s emergency medical services system:
- 170 licensed private ambulance services (715 total public and private services state-wide)
- 3,600 licensed ambulances with 74% operated by private providers
- 70,000 EMTs and 17,000 paramedics

Essential Health Care Services. The emergency medical services (EMS) system assures a timely and medically appropriate response to 9-1-1 calls and inter-facility transports. Emergency medical technicians are trained to deliver basic life support (BLS) services including first aid, oxygen, splint and bandage application and CPR. Paramedics are trained to deliver advanced life support (ALS) services including intravenous therapy, airway management, cardiac monitoring, defibrillation and medications.

Significant Charity Care and Uncompensated Care. Ambulance service companies provide significantly more charity care and uncompensated care than other health care service providers thus making significant contributions to the health care safety net. Ambulance services must, by law, respond to, treat and transport emergency patients and cannot refuse care because of a patient’s inability to pay.

Strained Health Care System. Increasingly, ambulances are diverted from receiving hospitals due to a shortage of nurses and physicians to treat incoming patients. Ambulance crews are forced to wait in emergency rooms, often for several hours, while their patient waits on an ambulance stretcher before the facility will accept responsibility for patient care. These diversions and wait times endanger the patient and lead to increased EMS system costs.

Labor Intensive Services. The ambulance industry is labor intensive with roughly 70% of all expenses attributed to labor costs (wages, benefits and insurance). Continued inadequate reimbursement will require labor costs to be reduced, resulting in layoffs, fewer vehicles on-duty and longer response times. Ambulance personnel make 30% less than comparably trained hospital personnel and 50% less than public safety personnel such as police officers and firefighters.

Clinical and Technological Advances. Advances in medical science and technology are resulting in increased local mandates, enhanced treatment protocols, more sophisticated medical and communication equipment and more stringent response time requirements through performance-based contracts. All of these features benefit patients while increasing the cost of operations.

Vital Component of the Public Safety Response to Disasters. EMTs and paramedics are assembled into Ambulance Strike Teams and can be deployed often long distances to participate in local and regional evacuations. Recently, ambulances have provided life-saving response to devastating fires, earthquakes and many other types of multiple casualty incidents.

California Ambulance Association
Founded in 1948, the CAA serves as the voice and resource for emergency and non-emergency ambulance services. The association also:
- Promotes high quality, efficient and medically appropriate patient care.
- Advocates the value that pre-hospital care provides in achieving positive patient outcomes.
- Promotes effective and fiscally responsible EMS systems and establish standards for system design.

For more information, contact the CAA at (877) 276-1410 or go to www.the-caa.org.