

Officials prepare for strike by EMTs

AMR workers seek pay raise

By Ryan Haggerty, Globe Correspondent | July 29, 2007

About 1,000 employees of a private ambulance company that serves 40 communities in Maine, New Hampshire, and Eastern Massachusetts are threatening to strike tomorrow if union and company negotiators cannot reach contract agreement today.

"This is not a decision our workforce has taken lightly," said Torren Colcord, president of the National Emergency Medical Services Association, which represents American Medical Response employees. "They have a heartfelt desire to serve the community -- their families live here, too. AMR has backed them so far up against the wall, they feel this is their only option."

An AMR spokeswoman said the company plans to keep negotiating.

"We are going to back to the bargaining table" today, Deborah Hileman said. "The company is committed to bargaining in good faith and reaching an agreement that is fair and equitable to both parties."

If the talks are not successful, she said, the company has a contingency plan to cover for the potential loss of paramedics, emergency medical technicians, and dispatchers.

She said she could not comment on the plan's details.

But Department of Public Commissioner John Auerbach said by phone last night that AMR has told the state it will staff its ambulances with nonunion employees, qualified contractors, and employees from other states who are certified in Massachusetts.

AMR's employees are seeking wage increases and changes to the company's healthcare policies, Colcord said.

The company provides primary 911 response in 18 Massachusetts communities, including Brockton, Newton, and Plymouth. It also provides backup service in 22 communities, Colcord said.

Emergency responders throughout the region are concerned about AMR's refusal to divulge details of its contingency plan, said James Orsino, president of the Emergency Medical Services division of the Boston Police Patrolmen's Association.

"If there is a plan out there, which nobody seems to know about outside of AMR, it's in the public interest to announce what that plan is," Orsino said yesterday.

In Boston, city ambulances respond to 911 calls, while AMR crews handle non-emergency transportation for a number of hospitals, nursing homes, and clinics. Orsino said he was particularly worried that Boston ambulance crews would be asked to cover for the AMR ambulances.

"We cannot absorb the work. . . . The people of Boston could end up waiting for an ambulance because of the actions of AMR," he said.

The state Office of Emergency Medical Services has issued a waiver that, if a strike occurs, would allow ambulance companies to staff advanced life support units with one paramedic and one basic EMT, instead of the usual two paramedics, Colcord said.

"I fear that it may enable AMR to feel that they don't need to get a deal done because then they feel the state's on their side," he said. "I understand the state's reasoning, but I think they've caused the process to take a step backward."

A number of state agencies have reviewed AMR's contingency plan and have prepared plans of their own to cope with a possible strike, Auerbach said.

"We are confident that they have a plan to provide coverage," Auerbach said. "If the strike goes on, we will monitor their plans on a day-to-day basis, because they will need to adapt their plans to accommodate the conditions."

Ambulances from neighboring communities will respond in AMR's coverage areas when needed, and state agencies will monitor all 911 calls to AMR service areas, Auerbach said.

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