

## CareFlite rolling out newer, safer ambulances

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CareFlite, the nonprofit medical transport company governed by North Texas health systems, may be known for its blue and orange marked helicopters, but it's bringing new vehicles into its fleet to make its services safer for patients and also for its employees.

The company is in the process of rolling out 24 new ground ambulances, configured to be safer for paramedics and emergency medical technicians while still providing the flexibility to provide care to patients in transit.

The approximately \$3.75 million undertaking, which includes all of the equipment with each of the two dozen new ambulances, came through continuous capital campaign fund-raising and commercial financing, said James C. Swartz, CareFlite president and CEO.

The ambulance industry in the United States is not well regulated, Swartz said, which means that injuries and fatalities during crashes are not uncommon. Because ambulances often cross intersections against the traffic lights and are traveling at fast speeds to get patients care they need, the vehicles are actually more dangerous than emergency helicopters.

Emergency transport helicopters have less space in them and require each passenger — including the medical personnel — to be seat-belted in.

"It occurred to us, gosh, if we can do that on a helicopter, we should do that on a truck," Swartz said.

Swartz pointed to figures comparing ambulances to other vehicles from the Fatality Analysis Reporting System, which is part of the National Center for Statistics and Analysis, which in turn supports the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration with data and statistics.

According to the data, ambulances have 3,200 crashes per 100 million miles, which is four times the rate of motorcycles, eight times the rate of cars and light trucks, and 15 times the rate of large trucks.

Part of the danger lies in the seats inside

the box, or patient care section of an ambulance, Swartz said. Many boxes include a side bench, where personnel sit to give care, but they are often unrestrained or moving around.

What is needed is back-facing or forward-facing seats with seatbelts and harnesses that require personnel to be secured, he said.

The trick with that is ensuring everything an EMT or paramedic needs is within each reach, said Mark Kessler, senior director of communications and ground operations for CareFlite.

And with the new ambulances, which have those seat arrangements and safety belts, there's still the challenge of changing the mindset the medical personnel and the industry leaders have, he said.

In other parts of the world, there are regulations that govern how ambulances should be configured, and there's a growing body of knowledge worldwide about dangers and how to prevent them, Kessler said.

But seeing and understand the dangers is different from actually putting systems in place to prevent harmful actions, he said. Knowing the data is one thing; getting used to working in a new ambulance is another.

"It's a huge culture shock to all of our paramedics and EMTs industrywide because for years, everybody's always felt the modular vehicles are the Cadillacs, and you have lots of room in the back and could walk around back there and lean over and do CPR," he said. "Unfortunately, we don't know how safe they are."

The new ambulances also have seats that a child safety seat or infant car seat can be properly strapped in to, Kessler said, and there are electronic safety systems in place to alert the driver if the vehicle is traveling too quickly or in a dangerous manner.

Of the new ambulances, 10 are to replace other vehicles in the fleet. The chassis is a Dodge Sprinter, Kessler said, and he and Swartz did extensive research both in the U.S. and in other countries before settling on the new model, which has perks like better fuel efficiency, lower emissions and a longer vehicle life.

Kessler said their goal was to take the best



ideas they could find and combine them all in these ambulances, and he encouraged other medical transportation companies to borrow ideas as well.

"Let's face it, if we can go to a manufacturer and get them to build what we need, anybody can do it," he said.

While these 24 vehicles are the most innovative addition to the CareFlite fleet, Kessler said, he expects that new vehicles in a few years will be different. As technology advances, companies will need to continue moving forward and adding the latest models to provide a safe work environment and better care to patients.

"It's not something that will happen industry-wide overnight, but I do think we have to change the way we think and the way we do things," he said. ■



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