

Consolidation of district rescue functions needed

With the state assuming an increasingly active role in regulating our basic ambulance services and in setting ever-more-strict standards for staffing, the Town of Barnstable's five fire districts face unprecedented pressure to consolidate and to restrict their activities to fire-related emergencies. If pressures prevail, a separate unit to respond to non-fire health and safety emergencies will be created.

Years ago, of course, when the village fire departments were first organized, every able-bodied man responded to fire alarms. All were volunteers—none was paid. Running to help a neighbor in trouble was simply the right thing to do. Rescue services evolved as an adjunct to fire departments from those early responses.

Time passed, and fire departments grew more complex. First, people recognized that chiefs should be salaried; then, their assistants. Later, part-time firemen were hired. Now some districts have not only acquired sophisticated apparatus, but a number of full-time and part-time personnel in addition to the call firemen who collect hourly wages whenever they answer an alarm.

As it stands today, two districts—Hyannis and Centerville-Osterville-Marstons Mills—are more-than-adequately manned and equipped while the other three—Cotuit, Barnstable village, and West Barnstable—are questionable.

Empire-building is natural to all able leaders. And once an empire takes shape, few builders want to see their realms dismantled, but today we must recognize that a fully-equipped ambulance can practically bring a hospital emergency room to the scene of disaster. Maintaining the empire of rescue units as part of fire departments has become unwieldy, uneconomical, and no longer really feasible.

The state's long arm has been extended, its fine hand is felt in the management of ambulance services and staffing. State regulations require paramedics be state and nationally certified. Certification necessitates completion of 800 hours of training. Paramedics no longer volunteer their services but, quite understandably, expect to be paid. And state regulations also require that an Emergency Medical Technician of intermediate training level be available in addition to a full-time paramedic on each rescue team.

Residents of the Town of Barnstable might well be better served if fire districts were to relinquish control of rescue units and limit themselves to fighting fires. Residents may also be better served if the five districts consolidate to insure that all the town's villages and their people receive equal protection. Were there one chief for all five districts, and were each of the five local districts capably administered by an assistant chief, the local stations could continue to house rescue vehicles and headquarter rescue teams on duty, thus assuring immediate response to local emergencies. Instead of operating under the jurisdiction of the fire departments, however, the rescue unit would be autonomous and be controlled by a dispatcher stationed in the centrally-located new police station which now boasts the most modern dispatch system available.

All Town of Barnstable residents could then enjoy full, equal protection, and an immediate response to any emergency wherever in town it might occur. And fire departments could concentrate their energies on fire-related emergencies.