Why does a fire truck respond to a medical call with an ambulance?

It is the policy of the Sanibel Fire and Rescue District (SFRD) to provide the highest standard of care to sick and injured patients. The Sanibel Fire and Rescue District ensures the highest standard of care is being delivered to patients by providing the fastest response times possible. These fast response times are achieved when the closest fire apparatus and medic unit are dispatched to an emergency call. The Sanibel Fire and Rescue District currently operates 2 stations, our station on Palm Ridge Rd also houses a Lee County ambulance.

All of our firefighters are certified either as Emergency Medical Technicians (EMT) or Paramedic. Each fire apparatus on Sanibel is always staffed with at least one paramedic. This means that when the fire apparatus arrives at the scene of a medical emergency before the ambulance, trained EMTs and paramedics begin lifesaving treatment. In fact, both fire apparatus here at SFRD are appropriately equipped to treat **all** life threatening emergencies ranging from cardiac arrest, asthma, diabetic, allergic reactions, falls, etc.

In addition to being capable of performing advanced life support procedures when the fire crew does arrive first on scene, it is also very important to have enough personnel available to appropriately treat critically injured or ill patients. Having two EMT/Paramedics on the Lee County ambulance is not enough to appropriately treat these critically injured or ill patients. It takes the additional personnel with training to correctly treat these patients

For example:

1. Two firefighters/EMT/Paramedics are needed to maintain the airway
2. One firefighter/EMT/Paramedic starts the IV
3. One firefighter/EMT/Paramedic defibrillates a cardiac arrest patient
4. One firefighter/EMT/Paramedic is needed to administer medication
5. One firefighter/EMT/Paramedic provides chest compressions

As you can see from this example it takes six trained personnel to properly treat a critically ill patient.

Many people have asked, “Why not send a fire truck to just the critically injured or ill patients?” The truth is, in almost all incidents, that emergency responders do not know how critical the patient is until they get on the scene. It is standard operating procedure for the SFRD to arrive at the scene of a medical emergency with the appropriate number of personnel to treat the patient. What may appear to be a minor illness or injury to the untrained bystander can turn out to be more serious. This serious condition requires the additional skills and staffing from firefighters assigned to the fire apparatus to properly treat the patient.

Another common question that people ask is “Why send a ladder truck or a full sized fire truck to a medical emergency, why not send a smaller rescue or pickup style truck with two firefighter?” The answer to this is simple, man-power. SFRD operates with a minimum staffing on each shift of six personnel. That is three on the ladder truck at station one and three on the engine at station two. If a pickup style rescue is put into service to run medical calls, two firefighters would have to be pulled off the ladder or engine, leaving it out of service with one firefighter left at the station unable to respond. It is totally unsafe for one firefighter to respond alone in either the ladder truck or engine to any type of call.

A rescue truck could be put into service if manpower were added. To put one resuce truck into service would require the addition of six firefighters, two per shift. This would result in an increase to our budget thus increasing taxes. At this time the most cost effective and efficient use of existing manpower is to simply run the entire crew on the ladder or engine. Here is why. Typically rescue units are added to stations that have high call volumes in densely populated areas to save wear and tear on the fire apparatus. Personnel at these stations also rotate off the rescue truck to avoid “burn-out” which leads to excessive use of sick time. At the busy stations this also keeps the fire apparatus available for a quicker response to fires. In these cases it may be cost effective to hire personnel to run rescue and medical calls on a rescue/pickup style vehicle.

SFRD ran a total of 1661 calls in 2018 that is an average of 3.6 calls per day, not a high call volume by any standard. Of those 1115 or 67% were medical in nature. These are the calls that a rescue/pickup truck would respond to. That is about 2 calls per shift. SFRD staff does not believe it is cost effective to hire 6 personnel and keep a rescue truck maintained for 2 calls per shift when a ladder or engine with full crews are in service, available, and capable of doing the same job. Additionally since we are unable to predict when or where the next fire call will be, SFRD staff is also in agreement that it is not prudent to take a fire apparatus and crew out of service to run medical calls by shifting personnel to a smaller vehicle based on the call type.

In conclusion, SFRD would like all citizens to know that we strive to provide the highest standards of care possible. This can only be accomplished through a coordinated effort involving the response of both a Lee County ambulance and a SFRD fire apparatus to medical emergencies.