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Washington in Depth

Video of the Day

The Day in Photos

PhotoWeek

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Portrait of War

Destination Mars

Homeland Security

Struggle for Peace

U.S. Oil Addiction

U.S. Crime Database

U.S. Census Database

Nov 19, 6:14 PM EST

## Private helicopter firms seek greater emergency medical role

By TOM STUCKEY  
Associated Press Writer

ANNAPOLIS, Md. (AP) -- Two private firms made a pitch Wednesday to play a larger role in flying critically injured people from accident scenes to hospitals, a role now filled primarily by state police helicopters.

"We do not advocate a dismantling of the state police system. We do advocate an integration into the system," said James Bothwell, chief operating officer for STAT MedEvac.

Bothwell and Ed Rupert, program director for MedSTAR, said that for the most part, neither police nor paramedics call their companies to transport accident victims even when they could get to a scene faster than a state police helicopter.

"We would support total integration of our aircraft into the emergency medical system of the state of Maryland," Rupert said.

Representatives of the two companies said about three-quarters of their flights in Maryland involve transferring critically ill patients from one hospital to another.

The comments came during testimony before a special joint committee of the Senate and House of Delegates that is studying the various components of the state's emergency medical response system, including helicopters, trauma centers and fire and rescue companies.

John Ashworth, chief executive officer of the University of Maryland Medical Center in Baltimore, said he stands "firmly behind the Maryland State Police" and relies on state police to get accident victims quickly to the university's trauma center.

"We believe very firmly in the mix we have right now," he said. "We think that is an absolutely superb use of our resources."

Sen. Thomas V. "Mac" Middleton, D-Charles, Senate chairman of the committee, said leaders of the emergency medical system, including state police, worry that in a time of budget deficits and spending reductions, the state police Medevac helicopters might be targeted for elimination as a cost-saving measure.

"But one of the reasons why we've got the best system in the world is because of this high degree of coordination," he said.

The state police Medevac helicopters are also very popular with voters, Middleton said. "You take a chopper out of southern Maryland and my citizens are going to go ballistic," he said.

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The two companies were questioned by committee members about whether expanded use of private helicopters would drive up costs to accident victims.

State police helicopters provide a free service. Costs are paid through a surcharge Marylanders pay on vehicle registration fees.

Rupert and Bothwell said there would be little impact on individuals or on overall costs.

Bothwell said about 45 percent of the flights made by STAT MedEvac are paid for by the federal government under Medicaid and Medicare programs. Commercial insurance companies cover another 45 percent of the flights.

The remaining 10 percent are the responsibility of people who do not have private or government insurance, Bothwell said.

The cost is deeply discounted for private individuals, averaging about \$880, he said. In cases where people can't pay, the debt is often written off; in other cases, the companies arrange for periodic payments over two or three years, Bothwell said.

Only rarely does his company turn debts over to collection agencies, and then only in the case of people who refuse to respond to requests for payment, he said.

The two witnesses said their standards for safety and medical care match those of state police. With speed such a critical element in whether severely injured accident victims will survive, Bothwell and Rupert said they should be called on when state police helicopters are tied up elsewhere and they can get to the scene quicker.

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Comments and questions

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## Costs

**STATE POLICE:** State police helicopters provide a free service.

**PRIVATE FIRMS:** The fee varies, but it is usually covered by Medicare, Medicaid or private insurance. For those with out insurance, the cost averages around \$880.

cer for STAT MedEvac.

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147  
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# Medevac issue merits close attention

## SMILE WITH YOGI:

Yogi Berra was famous for his malapropisms, most of 'em good for a laugh or a smile. This is just one of many that I got a kick from: "Ninety percent of the game is half mental."

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## GOT YOUR FLU SHOT?

It was a great opportunity to experience our tax dollars at work. Ruth and I took advantage of the recent flu vaccine clinic given, without charge, at the beautiful Chesapeake College Performing Arts Center. Both of us were much impressed as the folks from the Queen Anne's County Health Department, and a number of volunteers, administered the vaccine to more than 500 citizens. I am not aware of the exact number, but was told there had been 500 given shots when we arrived around 6 p.m. and there was another hour to go.

It was a mighty efficient operation all the way around and took less than a half-hour of our time. I was told it was a county-wide exercise sponsored by the Governor's Bioterrorism Preparedness Program. The information we received stated the clinic "was a drill for a mass distribution center, typical of what we would do if there was a terrorist event that required everyone to receive medicine or be vaccinated."

I didn't realize it at the time, but apparently, babies as young as six months can be vaccinated for flu all the way up to we senior citizens. Anyway, if you didn't take advantage of this free clinic, see your doctor about getting the vaccine now, or call the Health Department at 410-758-0720 and get information. It may save you a lot of grief this coming winter.

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## WHAT A SORRY STATISTIC:

Couldn't help but notice the other day those figures in the newspaper, reported to be obtained from the FBI, that the state of Maryland ranks a sorry third in our

## WRITER'S NOTEBOOK



Dan Tabler

nation of 50 states with the percentage of murders involving firearms. The national rate is 63.4 percent, while Maryland was at 72.7 percent! Only Vermont, with 85.7 and Louisiana, at 74.7 were higher. It is indeed a troublesome record as we read about a killing almost daily in Baltimore, and a story as this reminds us of the two police officers killed right here in Centreville not too long ago.

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## CHANGES NOT NEEDED:

It took a sustained letter-writing campaign a few years back to have a Maryland State Police medevac helicopter stationed here at the Centreville Barrack. Since that time, as traffic and population increased tremendously on this part of the Shore, its life-saving value has been far-reaching.

We now hear that legislators are being asked by private companies, operating helicopters, to give them more business, by letting them send their closest helicopter to accident scenes rather than a police medevac.

It is a bad idea. The state MSP medevacs, which operate on funds from auto registration fees and do not charge accident victims for transport to shock trauma centers, is one of the most efficient in the nation. It should be allowed to continue as it has been doing — saving countless lives.

My Goodwill Fire Company buddy, West Thompson and I faced our Senator E.J. Pipkin with the question at the ground-breaking ceremony at Sudlersville recently. We asked what he thought of the proposal. He declared to us "it will not go through. Not a chance," he said. Both of us told him our experience with the system over the years and assured him the volunteer fire, rescue and EMS personnel up and down the Eastern Shore would undoubtedly back up our response that the MSP medevacs are saving lives and it would be a terrible mistake to consider

allowing private companies to do the job.

Keep your eye on this proposal when the state legislature meets in January — it will probably come up and we must be ready to oppose it. Money is not the issue here — lives are!

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**STREET BANNERS:** Talking about Sudlersville, driving through our upper-county community the other day on the way to the firehouse expansion ground-breaking, I noticed colorful banners attached to light poles on the main street. Are they new, or have I just missed them in the past? I know Easton had a number of local-type banners hung from poles around the downtown section. Might be something for the committee beginning the planning of the county's 300th anniversary to consider for our county seat!

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**NEW CROSSWALKS:** Sudlersville has its street pole banners, and the county seat has newly painted and signed pedestrian crosswalks. One can only hope that motorists driving through town know the law — a person in a crosswalk is the same as if walking along the sidewalk. The vehicle must stop until that person is across the street to the sidewalk.

Since Centreville has only had one clearly marked crosswalk (it is on Broadway next to the courthouse, and I have wondered just how many times drivers have struck or sideswiped the little sign in the middle of the crosswalk), I am certain many motorists may be confused at the new signs and newly painted crosswalk.

We are not used to seeing crosswalks in the middle of the block in small towns, but it is the safety of the pedestrian and you can be slapped with a fine if you, the driver, do not stop and allow the person in the crosswalk to walk across in front of you.

No, I don't know the fine or how it is going to be enforced, but just be aware Centreville has entered the big time and watching out for the increasing number of pedestrians on the street.





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52  
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# Medic crews plead case

## Private firms want to work in state EMS system

By SUSAN C. NICOL

News-Post Staff  
snicol@fredericknewspost.com

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ANNAPOLIS — Officials from two commercial helicopter services believe they should be allowed into the Maryland Emergency Medical Services (EMS) system, and told legislators Wednesday it's not their intention to dismantle the Maryland State Police aviation division.

Officers from STAT MedEvac and MedSTAR Health said regardless of how recent discussions on the issue have sounded, it's not a case of "us vs. them."

Their comments came during a hearing before a joint legislative committee studying the state's EMS system. Created by a bill during the last General Assembly session, the panel has two years to make its recommendations.

An interim report will be compiled by the end of this year, but is not expected to contain any recommendations, legislators said.

Not integrating the commercial helicopters into the system is not in the best interest of patients, which should be the paramount concern, said Bryson Popham, an attorney representing both carriers.

MedSTAR now has four helicopters based in Maryland, including one at Frederick Municipal Airport. It is primarily used for interhospital transports. How-

ever, the crews also responded to about a dozen requests from the scenes of accidents or serious injuries, said Edward Rupert, program director.

Mr. Rupert told the group that it only makes sense to him for the state to utilize the closest helicopter.

When an emergency medical technician or paramedic requests a helicopter for a seriously injured patient, SYSCOM, the state's emergency medical services communications agency, dispatches the appropriate state police helicopter to the incident.

An instrument on each chopper transmits its location to the center in Baltimore.

"Rapid air transportation has become a necessary component of the health care system. It is imperative to be able to transport critically injured and medically fragile patients in an expedited manner," Mr. Rupert said.

By allowing more commercial involvement, Mr. Rupert said the state police would be freed up to do more public safety missions.

Mr. Rupert said 87 percent of the MedSTAR flights are covered by insurance, with 13 percent self pay.

An actuary who studied the impact that STAT MedEvac's expanded services would have on the private insurance market concluded that it would be insignificant, Mr. Popham said.

Patients transported by state police helicopter whether it's

from the scene of an accident or a hospital are not billed. Part of the funding for the state's Medevac system comes from vehicle registration fees.

The cost of a trip by commercial helicopter averages about \$4,000, officials said, adding that the base fee is about \$6,000. But they were quick to point out that the majority of the charges are covered by insurance or Medicare or Medicaid.

Sen. Thomas M. Middleton, D-Charles, said the public and legislators fought long and hard to get state police helicopters in their areas, and they won't give them up easily.

He said his area in Southern Maryland was the last to get a helicopter, and people have come to rely on the reassurance that they're there.

Mr. Popham, representing the commercial carriers, said it wasn't his clients' intention to replace, but to supplement, the state police system.

Maj. Donald Lewis, commander of the state police aviation division who briefed lawmakers at an earlier hearing, said he intends to address some of the issues that were brought up Wednesday.

Approached after the session, he said he would not identify what things he found to dispute, if any. But he said he would be taking the opportunity to address them with legislators at another hearing.