

THE HallMark

Vol. 27 Vol. 6

A PUBLICATION OF HALL AMBULANCE SERVICE, INC.

March/April 2023

A photograph showing two paramedics in full personal protective equipment (PPE), including gowns, gloves, and face shields, loading a patient onto a stretcher inside an ambulance. The patient is lying on the stretcher, wearing a blue surgical mask and has medical equipment attached. The ambulance is white with blue and orange accents. The scene is outdoors, likely at a hospital or emergency scene.

Recounting the
Unimaginable

Recounting the Unimaginable

The Perseverance of Our People Was the Real Story of the Pandemic

BY JOHN SURFACE | CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER

I have been involved in EMS in one way or another since 1983, from my days as a firefighter in the United States Air Force to working for a family ambulance company and Fire District in Northern California to my last 26 years in Bakersfield.

My first call as a firefighter was a teenage boy who had 3rd degree burns to 90% of his body. I responded to a vehicle into a tree and upon arrival, found my favorite sergeant's wife pinned in. I have responded to a mass shooting at the high school I graduated from. I've seen people jumping from upper-floor windows to escape burning to death in an apartment building fire.

Cardiac arrests, shootings, stab-bings, overdoses, stillborn babies, you name it. Been there, done that, and got the mental scars to go with it. But none of that prepared me for COVID-19.

It's mid-March 2020. March Madness is kicking off. MLB opening day is a week away. COVID is starting to take hold along our eastern seaboard. Every night, the news is horrible, from deaths at a nursing home to full emergency rooms. Americans were in shock, yet we were almost living as normal here on the west coast. Then, boom, one



EMS crews had to adjust from seldom needing to don personal protective equipment to essentially wearing it throughout their 12 hour and 48-hour shifts.

case in town, then 10, 100, then all hell broke loose! COVID started to show itself as a monster that would get its way for a while.

The experts weren't sure what to do. Most of us were questioning who the experts were as data

and policy recommendations were changing daily. Some experts would say one thing on the morning news and something else on the evening news. But..... EMTs, paramedics, and nurses were knee-deep in what

people new to our EMS world deemed frontline personnel. I remember thinking our folks were frontline for all the bird flus, Ebola, and Influenza A outbreaks. We got this!

As COVID spread, our folks lived in Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). Gloves, gowns, booties, surgical hats, goggles, N95 masks, etc. We had to learn a new way to decontaminate people and equipment on the fly. Lots of decontamination experts started showing up to sell all kinds of contraptions.

Summer hit, and it was a typical Bakersfield summer with a couple of twists. First, PPE all day in the heat, followed by standing room only in PPE with cots head to toe in the ERs. Then you would go outside and stay in PPE while decontaminating your ambulance to prepare for the next call.

Second, our call volume exploded. EMS crews were running nonstop for their entire shift, donning and doffing PPE before and after each call. PPE was running short. We were making deals with whoever we could to buy PPE. Here's a new flash: PPE prices skyrocketed! Everybody blamed it on slow international transportation. We found a shipper that could bring it in through Alaska. And every PPE seller wanted cash upfront. Our people and this is really where this story is headed; our people were getting pummeled. They worked until they couldn't work

anymore. Many had issues at home. Schools were closed. Kids were stuck at home, and our employees from all divisions and offices had childcare issues.

We had several staff that changed to part-time. We had some that just flat out had to quit as work and childcare didn't match up. In the late fall of 2020, the vaccine became available, and to the dismay of many, EMS workers, those



Wellness checks before employees could start their shift became a part of every day life.

front-line people running the calls and spending their day with COVID in their personal space, were not in the first tier to receive the vaccine. We waited and waited and complained every chance we got. Thankfully, the CEO of a small hospital started sharing their vaccine with us, and the state made it available through the county. The vaccine emergency was over.

But call volume was still climbing. The size of our workforce was shrinking. The workload per person was climbing. Paramedic Supervisors were on an ambulance for their entire shift. Supervising wasn't happening, and it was

showing in our product. Then all of our managers started spending their entire shift on ambulances.

It was a vicious cycle and everyone was just flat out tired. Kern County stepped in to offer some assistance in the summer of 2021 to secure some ambulance strike teams to assist with the call volume.

Back to our people. There were days we had more than 20 people out on sick leave. Some were out

for up to 14 days. People stopped applying for work. Our staff were flat-out beat down. COVID was winning the fight. But our EMTs, Paramedics, Nurses, Dispatchers, Supply Technicians, Auto Detailers, Facilities Maintenance Teams, Human Resources, Payroll, Accounts Payable, Transportation Coordinators, Coders, Billers, and Vehicle Technicians kept Hall Ambulance going. Day in and day out, our people took care of business.

But the 911 system wouldn't slow down. Hospitals were full and sending patients out all over the state.

Continued on next page



Photo: Premier Ambulance

Recounting the Unimaginable

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Ingenuity Ensured Every Request for Medical Aid was Answered

BY JOHN SURFACE | CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER

"What's with those different colored ambulances running around town?" "Where did they come from?" These were frequent questions I would hear during the pandemic. I would explain that those ambulance crews were from out of town and here to help our crews manage the call volume.

The first out-of-town ambulances were from Ridgecrest's Liberty Ambulance which would assist with peak call volume times when they had units available. Using grant money, Kern County Public Health hired additional ambulances including Pro Safety & Rescue, and contracting with a group from the Los Angeles and Orange County Ambulance Associations providing strike teams of five ambulances. Their deployments started small, a week here, a week there.

As the grant funding ran out the agreements were transitioned to Hall Ambulance hiring eight

ambulances a week from the LA/Orange group. They provided a much-needed break for our crews and helped us improve response times across the county.

Bill Weston was the team leader for the crews from LA and Orange. He worked closely with Hall Ambulance General Manager Myron Smith, Operations Manager Darrell Stapley, and Quality Assurance Manager Jennifer Att to get his teams on board and trained weekly. Together they created a very well-oiled machine and remained open to better efficiency discussions throughout the many months long partnership.

When Weston and his teams were released from their last deployment, he went out of his way to compliment our staff for being so welcoming and professional during their time here. Our Operations staff would echo those sentiments towards Weston and all other companies' EMTs, and paramedics. *

Crews not on a LDT were often sitting at a hospital waiting two, three, or even eight hours for their staff to assume patient care.

Kern County came in with another round of grant-funded assistance with strike teams and traveling paramedics. Every little bit helped! The leadership from the strike team groups praised Hall crews for their dedication to their community over and over again. Remember, this story is about the people!

As we moved into 2022, the grant funding so the strike teams and the traveling paramedics became Hall Ambulance's expense (try having that conversation with the CFO and controller). But we didn't have a choice. We had to keep them here to help us care for our people. In 2022 we spent more than \$7 million on outside staffing.

We then decided to test a theory. If we paid our staff double time for all extra shifts, could we cover enough to release some of the very expensive strike teams? So far, the answer is yes. Only time will tell.

As I wrap this up, I undoubtedly missed someone who worked their tail off during the pandemic (purely not intentional). It takes all of us to make this work. But back to the front lines. Our EMTs, paramedics, and nurses took a beating during COVID. This thing was a monster! *

The Mental Health Toll of COVID-19

Talking About the Unspoken Aspect of the Pandemic on First Responders

BY JOHN SURFACE | CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER

COVID was a beast. It beat down some of the world's best Emergency Medical Services systems. Over the last three years, our people, our first responders, our Hall Ambulance heroes have been through one of the most challenging times in the 52-year history of Hall Ambulance. Many are now broken and may not recover for years.

While it's easy to articulate what happened to call volume, how much personal protective equipment (PPE) was used, how many hours were lost at hospitals waiting on beds, employee turnover, equipment cost, fuel, etc. It is much more challenging to articulate to someone outside of EMS what has happened to our people. No people, No EMS!

Our people have seen the attitudes of other healthcare workers turn sour. Our people and their patients were turned away from hospitals or told to keep their COVID patients in the ambulance until the room clears. Our people have seen the attitude of their friends and coworkers change as a result of the stress brought on by responding to calls in the COVID era.

The mental health toll is yet to be determined, and the full impact of COVID on our people may never

really be known.

But we still have a responsibility to make sure we offer every tool possible to help our heroes and their families navigate the lingering impact of COVID. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder/Disease has been in the national conversation for years. Everyone handles the stress



istock: coldnowstorm

The mental and emotional scarring first responders endured through the pandemic was very real.

that comes with treating traumatic patients differently. Whether a massive car crash where several kids are killed, to a pool drowning, or just a kid that looks like someone you know. It all adds up to fill our emotional storage tank. Every leader in EMS knows that the work we have done and that our heroes

are doing now takes a toll.

But there are tools out there to help! Our HR Department puts out the monthly WellNow newsletter. It describes tips for handling stress. Diet, exercise, and health choices all help heroes deal with it. That's just the easy stuff. We also offer all of our people several types of paid counseling. The Employee Assistance Program (EAP) has been around for 20 years. Dial a 1-800 number and get assistance. Then we have a mental health clinician, Sunny Mueller, on call. She simply sends us a bill for hours she spent with our people. No names, just the bill. Then we have Shielding the Front Line (formerly 911 At Ease). This group of clinicians will take calls from Kern County First Responders and their families and set up counseling sessions. Again, at no cost to employees, and we have no idea an employee has even engaged them.

As we move past COVID, our people's mental well-being must remain a top priority. We are committed to providing easy and anonymous access for any Hall Ambulance hero who wants or needs to work with a clinician. Help is available, and help is free to you! *

EMDs Navigated the Pandemic Response Along with Typical 9-1-1 Calls

Keeping Track of Available Ambulance Resources Became Challenging at Times

BY JOHN SURFACE | CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER

When many people think of an emergency medical services (EMS) system, they likely think of paramedics and EMTs responding in ambulances to those needing medical aid. Without them, there is no EMS system; however, another key element in EMS is the role of the emergency medical dispatcher (EMD). Their value was never more visible than during the pandemic.

As 9-1-1 and interfacility call volume increased, the number of transactions completed in the Hall Ambulance Communications Center (OCD) escalated.

Our dispatchers had to adjust to different procedures to keep ambulances available for the most life-threatening emergencies. One of Kern County EMS's temporary changes was not sending ambulances to some of the lowest acuity calls for service. For example, the call would be surged if someone called 9-1-1 and the EMD determined it wasn't a true medical emergency. That meant an ambulance would not be responding. Our EMD staff had to call the original person who called 9-1-1 and tell



During COVID-19, EMDs were faced with something of a juggling act in securing EMS crews to respond.

them we were not coming—this was never a fun call to make.

Our EMDs would have more calls coming in than available ambulances. They would be calling crews at the hospitals, asking them to clear, contacting supervisors and managers to staff ambulances, sending text messages, and just trying to find one more crew to handle a call.

We were able to find a little relief from the staff in our Transportation Department. Transportation coordinators volunteered to alter their hours, adding late night,

weekend, and holiday shifts to assist with processing interfacility transfers. Every little bit helped!

When you add COVID, short staffing in OCD, short staffing in the 9-1-1 system, surged calls, and hospital delays, without a doubt, the last three years have been more stressful than any other time in OCD's history.

Like our EMS crews, our dispatchers faced immense pressure, but they stayed the course and faithfully served the people of Bakersfield and Kern County throughout the pandemic! *

A PERSONNEL NOTE

BY **FAITH VELASCO** | HR ASSISTANT I, AND **KRYSTAL MASCARINAS** | HUMAN RESOURCES ASSISTANT

Milestone Service Anniversaries

30 Years

John Wiley, CCT Paramedic

10 Years

Rod Castillo, Paramedic

5 Years

Jason Pimienta, Paramedic
David Taylor, EMT
Ingrid Anderson, EMT
Marcelino Cardona, EMT
Scott Williams, Paramedic
Brandy King, Coder
Alfredo Campos, Paramedic
Peter Martinez, Paramedic

1 Year

Miguel Rodriguez, EMT
Claudette Mackey, Supply Technician
Matthew Vierra, EMT
Matthew Edwards, EMT
Stephan Hernandez, EMT
Kenneth Lawrence, EMT
Jorge Nieto, EMT
Juan Cantu, Sr., Maintenance Detailer

Happy Birthday

03/02 Jose Hernandez Cardenas
03/02 James Wagoner
03/03 Laura Skiba
03/03 Kyle Schmitz
03/04 Myron Smith
03/04 Donovan Muriel
03/07 Brenda Ortiz
03/08 Miguel Ramirez
03/10 Teresa Steiner
03/10 Thomas Hammersley
03/10 Jesus Reyes
03/11 Baylee Cook
03/11 Steven Franks
03/11 Daniel Davis
03/12 Jeremiah Abram
03/13 Jacqueline Meadows
03/13 Ryan Obmann
03/14 James Bradbury

03/15 Brenda Rankin
03/16 Manuel Alcala, Jr.
03/19 Tabitha Braman
03/20 Hunter Bell
03/20 Joseph Hutchins
03/21 Wendy Soto
03/23 Max Fortnum
03/24 Christopher Brown
03/26 Ricky Hammersley
03/27 Elva Ramos
03/27 Kenneth Lawrence
03/28 Armando Lazaro
03/28 Patrick Wiley
03/28 Darren Hames
03/29 Leslie Hutchison
03/29 Michael Schroder
03/30 Juan Tirado
03/30 Hailey Crosswy

03/30 Carolina Contreras
04/01 Jason Achterberg
04/01 Zachary Pittman
04/02 Steven Barlow II
04/03 Mike Lucero
04/03 Joseph Rodriguez
04/05 Christine Harker
04/07 John Surface
04/08 Alexander Cortez
04/11 Kristi Buffuna
04/11 Marcus Hackmon
04/11 Anthony Pena
04/12 Edward Cordova
04/13 Heather Starr
04/13 Joseph Mitchell
04/16 Marcos Martinez
04/16 Yahari Salazar Gonzalez
04/17 Jason Monroe

04/18 Adam Moreno
04/18 Rachel Simpson
04/20 Jason Popejoy
04/21 Mark Morse
04/22 Alicia Perry
04/23 Joe Eastwood
04/25 Christina Rini
04/25 Jeffrey Albitre
04/25 Chandler Hale
04/25 Kevindeep Singh
04/26 Joe Aguilar
04/26 Adam Wills
04/28 Jessica Quinones
04/29 Peter Martinez
04/30 Ramiro Gonzalez
04/30 Laurel Carney
04/30 Kelly Kurtz
04/30 Brandon Ordonez-Rangel

Hall Ambulance Anniversary Trivia

Congratulations Esther Silva, Diane Nennig, and Lashika Britton on correctly guessing the answer to last issue's Trivia question: Which employee worked their first shift as a new paramedic at the CSUB Hometown Heroes Game on January 5? ANSWER: James Bunting

To participate in this edition's trivia, email your guess with the subject line: HallMark Trivia to corumm@hallamb.com by April 20. Up to four winners will be announced in the next edition.

Q What day at Hall Ambulance is celebrated as Founder's Day?

THE HallMark

Founder of Hall Ambulance Service

Harvey L. Hall

(1971-2018)

President & CEO

Lavonne C. Hall

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The HallMark is published for the staff, friends, and family of Hall Ambulance Service, Inc. Comments, questions, or suggestions should be directed to Mark Corum, director of media services at: corumm@hallamb.com.

Established in 1971, Hall Ambulance Service is the 9-1-1 paramedic provider for 94% of Kern County, California's population. The Company serves the communities of Bakersfield, Arvin, Lamont, Frazier Park, Tehachapi, Rosamond, Mojave, California City, Boron, Taft, Shafter, Wasco, McFarland, and Delano, and surrounding areas.



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Celebrating Founder's Day and 52 Years of Service to Bakersfield and Kern County



On February 10, 1971, Harvey L. Hall set up to build his vision of the greatest ambulance service in the United States based on his ideals of care, compassion, and community. In his honor, the Company has set aside February 10 as its Annual Founder's Day to celebrate his accomplishments. In 2020, Mr. Hall was named by the National EMS Museum and the California Ambulance Association as one of 17 native Californians responsible for shaping EMS in the United States.

This year, Mrs. Hall ordered champagne cupcakes for all on-duty employees working throughout Hall Ambulance's 9-1-1 service areas to enjoy. The backstory on these tasty treats is that from the beginning, Mr. Hall enjoyed having champagne cake from Smith's Bakeries for every Company celebration.

Founder's Day was also the perfect time to unveil and begin distributing the official Hall Ambulance ball cap for employees to wear as part of the uniform. *

Assemblymember Bains Honors First Responders for COVID-19 Response



Assemblymember Jasmeet Bains recognized first responders on the 3rd Anniversary of the State of California's shutdown to help control the spread of COVID-19.

As one of many on the frontlines fighting the pandemic, Dr. Bains honored those who answered the call for those in need. *