



RESCUE

A TRIBUTE TO AREA FIRST RESPONDERS

ADDISON
INDEPENDENT
Thursday, Sept. 4, 2025

Addison County first responders are facing challenges

By IAN CURRY

VERMONT — Emergency medical services (EMS) groups in Addison County are worried about the potential loss of revenue that could really put a pinch on local first responders.

The sweeping cuts to Medicaid this summer signed into law by President Trump combined with the solvency issues facing Vermont's largest commercial health insurance provider could jeopardize vital revenue for rescue squads and ambulance services across the county.

"We are a little concerned about what could potentially happen," said Kate Rothwell, the executive director of Middlebury Regional Emergency Medical Services (MREMS).

The Middlebury-based service operates four Advanced Life Support ambulances, and one of two EMS-based Heavy Rescue trucks in the state. Historically, Vermont's EMS has primarily been made up of qualified volunteers but according to Rothwell, the increasing cost to become certified combined with an increasing call volume has led to the professionalization of the state's emergency medical first responders. MREMS is made up of about 90% paid career staff who serve 11 Addison County towns, Rothwell said.

Like firefighters and police officers, EMS personnel are first responders. They respond to medical emergencies but also provide essential services like transporting patients

to hospitals and providing support for events. Unlike other first response agencies though, funding for EMS is to some degree at the mercy of case-by-case insurance reimbursements.

EMS providers, including MREMS and other rescue squads in Addison County, rely on reimbursements from Medicare, Medicaid and private health insurance companies to cover the cost of providing services. This doesn't just refer to when ambulances are on the road. EMS requires 24/7 readiness, and the upkeep of advanced medical equipment and ambulances. And paying professional staff is not cheap. Rothwell said that MREMS receives 85-90% of its revenue from insurance reimbursements.

Health insurance providers have varying guidelines when it comes to covering ambulance services. Medicare Part B generally covers 80% of ambulance costs, with the patient covering the remaining 20%, but only if it involves an emergency medical situation and transport to a hospital.

But Rothwell says when Emergency Medical Technicians respond to a medical emergency in rural Addison County, it may not always be feasible to immediately transport someone to a medical facility to receive treatment. EMTs and paramedics are trained in lifesaving care and are sometimes required to provide treatment on the scene —

(See Challenges, Page 9)

A BRISTOL RESCUE Squad member stands ready at the Addison County Fair and Field Days Demo Derby.

Photo courtesy Bristol Rescue Squad

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Whiting first responders recall memorable call to school

By MARIA BARR

WHITING — In rural Vermont, volunteer rescue squads often find themselves responding to unexpected emergencies. But for Whiting First Response, one call more than a decade ago still stands out.

It was a snowy day, it took place in a second-grade classroom, and first responders greeted the surprise arrival of a new life.

On Jan. 21, 2011, Corey and Tim Smith of Castleton were on their way to Porter Hospital in Middlebury to deliver their first child when worsening road conditions forced them to stop at Whiting Elementary School, where Tim’s cousin Lacey Smith taught second grade.

Whiting’s emergency medical technician (EMT) Tammy Wilbur recalled that there wasn’t a school nurse

on duty at the tiny school.

“I happened to be home that day,” Wilbur recalled. “So I went down. Larry, my husband, went down. One of the sheriffs in the area showed up, and they got the mom into the first classroom and had all the kids go into the other classrooms.”

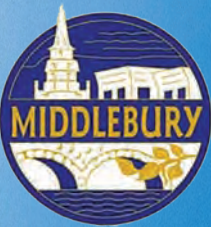
“She was with (the expectant mother) too, and she’s like, ‘Oh, don’t worry! Larry delivers calves all the time.’ So it was kind of humorous.”

— Tammy Wilbur

Tammy and Larry, both EMTs and training officers for Whiting, were joined by EMTs Marie Berry and Stacey Freeguard and first responder Bob Wood. They quickly transformed the classroom into a makeshift delivery room.

Tammy explained that while EMTs are trained annually to handle childbirth, this was the first time the training had been put into practice in Whiting.

Despite the unusual setting, teamwork (See Baby, Page 14)




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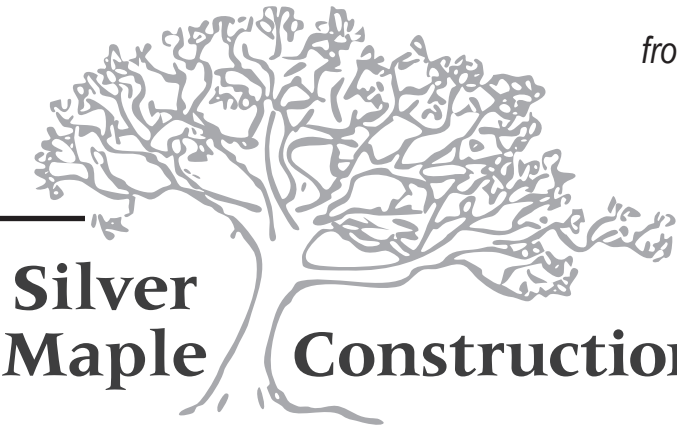
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Rescue volunteers really make a difference

By BEE ECKELS

NEW HAVEN — In small, tight-knit communities such as in Addison County, it's not rare to discover family members working alongside each other in various professional fields. For a long time, local rescue squads were a part of this story.

"Times are changing," said Lisa LaPete, Head of Service for New Haven First Response (NHFR). "(Rescue) used to be family-oriented, but everyone's going in different directions now."

LaPete, who is also a member of the Vergennes Area Rescue Squad, has been an EMT for 35 years, and has served the Addison County community for 12 years. Before moving to New Haven, LaPete was part of a rescue squad in the Milton-area, where she worked closely alongside other family members, such as her brother, who was the fire chief.

LaPete said the loss of numbers and the support systems created by a family-orientated team has not only taken a toll on the remaining EMTs — who are now under pressure to pick up the slack — and she thinks the falling numbers of first responders will eventually take a toll on

the community at large.

NHFR is a volunteer organization. The first responders who help protect the locality are not getting paid to do so. Instead, they are doing it to give back to their community.

"It's hard for volunteers to swallow the fact that ambulance drivers get paid, but they still do it anyway," LaPete said. "It's instilled in them to give back."

LaPete expressed concern that the next generation is more focused on the money than the fact that being an EMT, or part of an Emergency Medical Service (EMS) staff, is a revered line of work that, oftentimes, their parents, grandparents, and even aunts, uncles, cousins or siblings have done for decades before them.

With money becoming a priority to more and more people, NHFR has seen declining staff numbers in the past few years. Their current roster totals nine people, some of whom split their time volunteering as firefighters or for other EMS squads in surrounding towns.

Safety comes in numbers, and with the

(See Volunteers, Page 15)

"The mental health cases are real and they're scary. It's really hard."

— Lisa LaPete

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The Bristol Rescue Squad has identified the need to change its license level from an Advanced EMT Level Ambulance Service, to a Paramedic Licensed Ambulance Service to operate in Bristol, Lincoln, Monkton, New Haven, Starksboro and Buels Gore.

This agency proposes to begin operation at the new license level on January 1st, 2026 within the geographic boundaries of the six communities of Bristol, Lincoln, Monkton, New Haven, Starksboro and Buels Gore. In accordance with 24 V.S.A. Emergency Medical Services Statute, public comments are invited to be received by the department by Monday, September 22, 2025.

Address comments to:
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Challenges

(Continued from Page 2)

something that many insurers, including Medicaid and Medicare, don't reimburse for.

It's important to note that EMS has a duty of care and will respond to emergencies and provide care regardless of someone's ability to pay. But Rothwell said that the cuts and restrictions coming to government health programs, including Medicaid, could endanger the emergency medical system's ability to generate revenue.

"If those individuals currently receiving Medicaid are unable to qualify, that means our pool of uninsured could certainly increase," Rothwell said.

Mark Boltz-Robinson of Monkton First Response and Bristol Rescue Squad echoed that sentiment.

"The 'Big Beautiful Bill' and the cuts it is making to Medicaid jeopardize much of the emergency services system," Boltz-Robinson, who also serves as Monkton's town health officer, told the *Independent*. "It's not just a loss of insured, but these cuts touch on revenue for both hospitals and EMS agencies alike."

"Billing revenue from Medicaid for Bristol Rescue is about 60% of that income; if that gets cut, we'll be unable to meet financial needs, even with the generous financial support we get from our towns and our subscribers," he added.

According to Bristol Rescue Chief Will Elwell, the squad's three ambulances responded to over 1,000 calls and provided almost 300 interfacility transfers across four states in 2024. Their ambulance station is one of only three in Addison County with advanced lifesaving capabilities and is often the closest to many remote areas of the region.

In fact, the 2023 Vermont EMS Advisory Committee report found that large parts of Addison County are considered ambulance deserts, meaning that an ambulance station is at least a 25-minute drive away. Around

40,000 people state-wide live in these deserts.

EMS funding isn't a new issue. A 2023 report from the Vermont EMS Advisory Committee found glaring funding gaps in EMS budgets across the state that had been left unchecked for years. Health insurance reimbursement rates have simply not been high enough to adequately cover the cost of providing EMS. The committee also found that the use of municipal property taxes to make up for insufficient reimbursements was not an efficient way to cover EMS, as it contributed to rising municipal budgets and taxes without solving the issue. The state is awaiting a new report from the EMS Advisory committee, which is slated for release in December.

In November 2023, Vermont's Congressional delegation in Washington introduced legislation called the EMS ROCS act, which would provide Medicare coverage to ambulance services that do not include transportation, including on-scene treatment. The bill was read twice in front of the Committee on Finance when it was introduced, and considering recent federal cuts to public health, it's unlikely any further action will be taken.

For now, rural rescue squads are on their own. Rothwell noted that the nearest trauma, cardiac and stroke centers are at UVM Medical Center in Burlington, and that ambulance trips can take more than 45 minutes from parts of Addison County.

BIG INSURER TROUBLED

But Addison County's ambulance services aren't only bracing for cuts to federal health spending. Vermont's largest private health insurance provider, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Vermont (BCBSVT), is embroiled in an insolvency crisis that puts the Green Mountain State's entire healthcare system at risk. BCBSVT, which insures 230,000 Vermonters, or a third of the state's population, is struggling to reimburse an average of \$35 million a

week in insurance claims. The company has only \$58 million in the bank after reporting a record annual deficit of \$62.1 million last year.

Vermont already has some of the highest commercial health insurance costs in the country, with the average unsubsidized monthly premium sitting at \$621 for an individual. Rothwell told the *Independent* that the high cost of health insurance places a big burden on Vermonters, which is already affecting Addison County's EMS providers.

"We see a lot of people are raising their deductibles to make private insurance premiums more affordable, then struggle to pay medical bills, including ambulance service bills, with their higher deductibles," Rothwell said.

Still, state health officials have expressed optimism about the future of healthcare in Vermont. The legislature recently passed two bills (H.266 and S.126) that seek to rein in healthcare costs while giving the state more oversight over hospitals and insurers. However, they warn that Trump's recent spending laws could jeopardize that progress.

In an interview with the *Independent* this July, incoming Green Mountain Care Board Executive Emily Brown said "The Trump administration's bill passed last week will have a devastating impact on our health care system and the patients who rely on it. Many of our rural health care providers already operate on razor thin margins, and this bill will only inflate the financial health care crisis in Vermont."

Health officials agree that Vermont's healthcare system is facing an uncertain future, but what remains abundantly clear is that EMS, including rescue squads and ambulance services, must pay for the cost of providing services if they are to remain open.

Rothwell said that when health insurance reimbursements fail to make up the costs of providing services, ambulance services will petition towns for financial support to help make up the funding gaps. This means that having fewer people with health insurance will likely put a heavier financial burden on towns and their residents if they are to maintain their rescue services.

Despite all the challenges, health professionals like Rothwell are proud to be a central pillar of life in Addison County.

"We don't just answer 911 calls," she said.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, EMS groups across the county were on the front lines providing tests, administering vaccines and educating residents.

"We strive to be a healthcare provider for all our communities," she said.

Rothwell emphasized that MREMS has recently partnered with Porter Medical Center and the Patricia Hannaford Career Center to begin providing EMT and Emergency Medical Responder classes. Rothwell hopes that training and certifying more healthcare professionals will not only improve the Addison County healthcare infrastructure, but will get younger people interested in a challenging, but rewarding career in medicine. She also hopes that the partnership will help fill the ranks of local rescue squads who are always in need of trained and reliable health professionals willing to step up to the challenge.

Addison County's EMS community realizes that the hardships they're facing are shared by EMS nationwide, but local health professionals like Rothwell say they're here to stay, as they're confident in the life-saving services they provide and the communities they serve.

"We have great community support," Rothwell said.



KATE ROTHWELL,
EXECUTIVE Director of
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EMS, says ambulance
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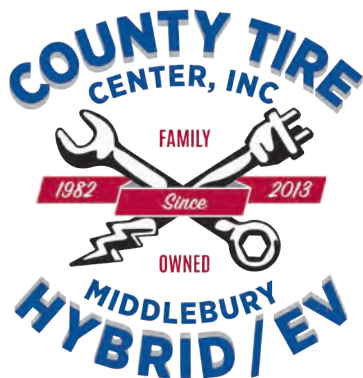
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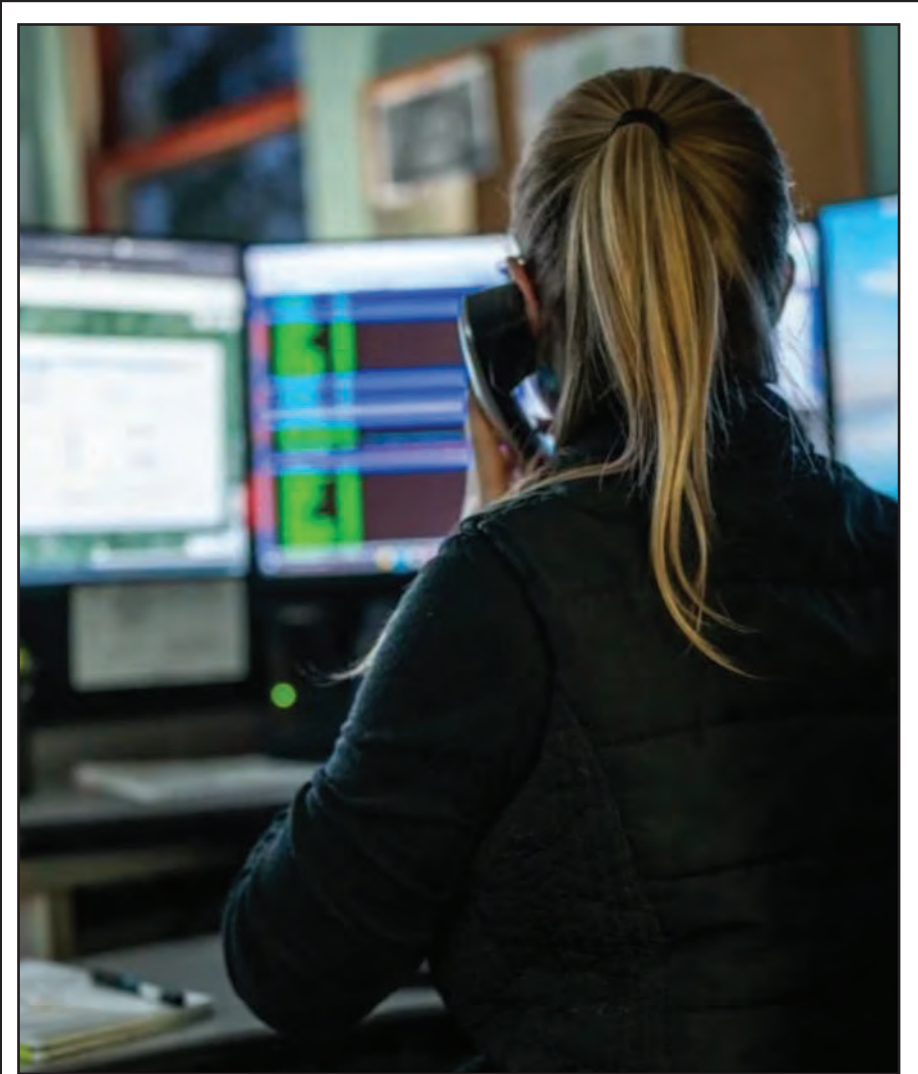
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Fielding calls

A COMMUNICATIONS TECH monitors the screens at the Middlebury Regional EMS. MREMS's communications hub helps it to provide comprehensive, professional, and reliable communication services 24 hours a day, county-wide, for both fire and EMS agencies. According to MREMS, the service handles nearly 4,000 911 calls annually.

Photo courtesy of MREMS



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Baby

(Continued from Page 6)
and quick thinking prevailed.
“One of the substitutes (Kim Hescoek) that was there that day, she was with (Corey) too, and she’s like, ‘Oh, don’t worry! Larry delivers calves all the time.’ So it was kind of humorous,” Tammy said.
Middlebury Volunteer Ambulance Association (know called Middlebury Regional EMS) arrived just in time to provide postnatal care and assist with the final moments of delivery.
“When Middlebury came, they treated and supported the lady and the baby, and the EMTs on Middlebury came in and helped my wife with the delivery. There were four of us there on the delivery. We were all there, but (Tammy) was actually right there,” Larry said.
The baby, named Maxten Smith, was born safely, weighing 8 and a half pounds.
Larry recalled, “The father called, he owned the auto parts store in Castleton, and he called down and told one of the people there, and she got word back to me, and said, ‘You’re not going to believe this. A farmer in Whiting just delivered my baby!’ But like I said, I mean, we were all the delivery team.”
The Vermont Legislature honored the first responders weeks later with House Concurrent Resolution 55, which honored not only the Smith family and school staff but also highlighted how rural communities pull together in moments of crisis and joy alike.
Students in Lacey Smith’s class even created artwork for Maxten, later compiled into a scrapbook and sent to the family.
Now, 14 years later, Tammy and Larry Wilbur — still active EMTs with Whiting First Response — point to that day as a memorable moment in their squad’s history. Though Whiting Elementary School has since closed, the story lives on as a reminder of how small-town volunteer squads not only respond to emergencies but also become part of life’s most extraordinary moments.



Being prepared

MREMS MEMBERS TAKE part in rescue training on a regular basis. The service responds to nearly 3,000 emergency calls each year in the towns of Bridport, Cornwall, Middlebury, Orwell, Ripton, Salisbury, Shoreham, Weybridge, Whiting, part of New Haven and the Middlebury Snow Bowl in Hancock.

Photo courtesy of MREMS

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Volunteers

(Continued from Page 8)

shortage of Vermont State Police on top of already-low EMS numbers, local rescue squads are stretched thin. Especially with mental health calls becoming more frequent in recent years.

“The mental health cases are real and they’re scary,” LaPete said. “It’s really hard.”

In hopes of increasing their staff to help take the strain off of existing members, NHFR is always looking for volunteers to “give what you can.” While they don’t offer pay, NHFR will cover the cost for the first responder certification course. The expectation is that the new volunteer will commit to serving under NHFR for at least a year after receiving their certification.

To receive your national certification, one must attend a semester's worth of classes, which typically meet one to two times a week from December to April.

Missing a class results in the inability to obtain a certificate. Accelerated options for training are available depending on the different levels of certification required for certain positions. Interested parties should get in contact with the Head of



“*M*aking a difference for one person means the world to me.”

— *Lisa LaPete*

Service of their intended squad to figure out what plan makes the most sense. The cadet program is also a great way to give back to the community, especially for people looking for experience before going into the medical field.



Volunteering is part of the EMS legacy in rural Vermont, according to those who do so. Having community members who are willing to look out for others without the expectation of compensation shows the strength of our small state. It is now more critical than ever for people to take renewed interest in this longstanding tradition. Volunteer EMS helps build strong connections within communities, as it links trained professionals directly to citizens. LaPete herself had an experience where she was able to save the life of a woman having a brain aneurysm because the woman knew her, knew her role in the community and trusted

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Lisa LaPete*

her.

“Making a difference for one person means the world to me,” LaPete said.

If you might be interested in this rewarding role, considering reaching out to your local EMS squad.



At the ready

VERGENNES AREA RESCUE's two ambulances are key to repsonding to more than 1,000 calls a year.

Photo courtesy of Vergennes Area Rescue



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Putting others' lives first

A MEMORIAL SERVICE to remember the 97 Vermonter first responders who have died in the line of duty will take place at the Vermont Emergency Services Memorial on Sunday, Sept. 21, at 1 p.m. The memorial is located on the grounds of the Vermont Police and Fire Academy, Academy Road, in Pittsford.

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