

A Brief History of Lethbridge's Integrated Fire and EMS Service

Strong westerly winds, a dry climate and largely wooden structures combined to create a high fire risk for the community of Lethbridge in its early years. City leaders recognized the threat and in 1886 the Lethbridge Fire Brigade (later changed to 'Department' in 1914) began to operate as a volunteer 'bucket brigade'. In 1909 it became a full time fire department with ten members; seven firefighters, a lieutenant, a captain and the chief.

Prior to 1912 the Galt Hospital provided ambulance services to the community of Lethbridge. The operation of the ambulance service was a point of concern for the community for several reasons. In order for a patient to be transported in the ambulance a physician would need to sign a certificate and if no physician was available the patient would have to wait; in whatever condition they happened to be in. An event that brought this to a head was in 1910 when, '**... Joe Birney, an employee of Ellison's Mill, was caught in a belt, which tore off his right arm and broke both his legs. The ambulance was phoned at once but refused to come without a doctor's certificate. Its arrival took more than an hour, the victim meanwhile suffering shock and bleeding profusely.**' (Johnston, Bochan, 1986, pg. 59, par. 3). Due to the public outcry the city leaders decided to pass the ambulance service to the fire department because it was thought they would be able to provide reliable and timely response. On June 22, 1912 the fire department assumed control of ambulance service delivery and this integrated fire/EMS (emergency medical services) system has continued to this day.

A recommendation from Chief Hardy for '**... purchasing a Motor Ambulance (Ford)**' (Hardy, 1917, pg. 4) in 1916 provided a Ford Model T ambulance the following year which, '**... has given far better service in every way than was obtainable with the Horse Ambulance.**' (Hardy, 1918, pg. 2). By 1920 all front line apparatus (fire and EMS) were motor driven and horse drawn equipment were slowly phased out over the next few years.

Several successive fire chiefs requested the ambulance service be taken over by a private company however this never became a reality. The reasoning for this request was the fact the ambulance crews were required to respond as firefighters and if they were on an ambulance call they could not respond to a fire if needed. The fire department had no choice but to continue to provide an integrated response and added additional ambulances, fire apparatus and stations over the years to better respond to the needs of the community.

The 1970's saw increased medical training for staff of the department to the EMT-A level (Emergency Medical Technician – Ambulance) and in 1986 the department hired its first paramedics and started down the path of developing an Advanced Life Support (ALS) response

system. In 2003 the department submitted a proposal to city council for additional ALS equipment for all frontline response vehicles which was unanimously supported.

Today our highly trained staff responds to 11,000 EMS and 1400 fire calls annually. We operate 4 ALS ambulances 24hrs and one ALS ambulance during peak times. All frontline fire apparatus are stocked with ALS equipment and are staffed with at least one ALS paramedic which provides the highest level of care for our community.

The benefits of having an integrated service are many but some of the most significant are:

- Flexibility of responses - If an ambulance is unavailable a frontline engine or rescue can respond and provide emergent ALS care to patients until a transport unit comes available. In 2011 our engines responded to 3,000 EMS calls in addition to 1,300 fire calls
- Role flexibility – Because every firefighter is a trained EMT/paramedic-Firefighter they have the ability to be utilized in either role. Often the situation on a fire or EMS scene can change quickly and the ability of cross-trained staff to adapt to these changes is a huge benefit.
- Continuity of care – The care an engine crew provides to a patient is the same that an EMS crew gives because they receive similar training and work together on a daily basis. A patient receives the same care regardless of who responds first.
- Departmental efficiency – Having cross-trained staff gives the city an inherent efficiency of having one employee group with multiple functionalities.

2012 marks the 100th anniversary of the department's role as an integrated EMS service and also marks the departments 126th year providing fire suppression.

'It is an exciting time for our department to be celebrating 126 years as a fire department and 100 years in EMS. Our past and future success as an integrated service is truly based on the hard work and dedication of all of our staff.' Chief Brian Cornforth

References

Johnston, Alex; Bochan, Ted, (1986), Lethbridge: A Century of Firefighting, The City of Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada

Hardy, William, (1917), Annual Report for the Year 1916, City of Lethbridge, retrieved from Galt Museum and Archives, Accession #: 19811002, 20101000

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