

Fire chiefs gather in support of Montgomery ambulance fee

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Fire chiefs from across the Washington region joined their struggling Montgomery County counterpart, Chief Richard Bowers, in a District training center Thursday to provide uniformed backup for Bowers's plea to baffled voters back home: Don't fear the ambulance fee.

"There are quite a lot of rumors and innuendos as to what would happen," said District Fire Chief Dennis Rubin. The actual result, Rubin said, is that the city collects nearly \$22 million in much-needed revenue and gets fewer than one complaint for every 1,000 bills that go out.

The chiefs from the District, Prince George's County, Fairfax County and top fire officials from other area communities also said fears voiced by opponents - primarily that the fee would discourage some from calling 911 - had not been borne out by their experience.

"We've seen no degradation of the number" of emergency medical services calls, Stafford County Fire Chief J. Robert "Rob" Brown Jr. said, adding that the international group of fire chiefs he's involved with strongly recommends adoption of billing for ambulance service.

But the fight over the fee in Montgomery has pitted the county's volunteer firefighters and other critics against career fire officials, a majority of county council members and state legislators from Montgomery, and even the League of Women Voters. It has devolved into a test of wills that no group of fire chiefs can extinguish leading up to Nov. 2, when county voters will decide whether to approve the fee.

"It makes me a little sick," said Eric Bernard, executive director of the Montgomery County Volunteer Fire-Rescue Association, who attended the session and afterward called it "a little love fest of people outside Montgomery County who won't pay the tax."

Such characterizations were precisely what Bowers was seeking to get beyond Thursday, and that led him to e-mail his colleagues for backup.

"No county resident will have to pay a dime. No county resident will ever have to pay a nickel or a penny," Bowers said.

Indeed, Montgomery's approach is more generous than in some neighboring jurisdictions.

In Montgomery, residents won't get a bill, regardless of whether they have insurance, Bowers and other officials said. A county vendor will send the bills directly to insurance companies. The county will also cover co-pays and handle any disputes, officials said.

Program critics have broader objections based on political philosophy, experience and concerns that the program could change over time.

"The first question I get is, 'How much is this going to cost me?' Always. I'd like to be able to say, 'Nothing,' " Bernard said. For "core government functions - police, fire, rescue - there should be no barriers. None."

In Prince George's County, some of the stickier questions about who must pay and under what circumstances have been worked out with a somewhat flexible billing regime.

Insurance companies get bills, according to Prince George's Fire Chief Eugene Jones, while uninsured residents are billed directly. But that is not the end of it.

"We send you three bills," Jones said. "If the citizen chooses not to pay, they don't pay."

Unlike situations in some states where, for instance, an auto registration or some other official service could be blocked if a resident does not pay a bill, that's not how it works in Prince George's. "There's nothing connected to the bill, other than the request" for payment, Jones said. "That's the end of it."

Rubin described a similar philosophy for the District.

"Ours is a soft bill. There's not a real aggressive follow-up," Rubin said. "I'll leave it at that."

Rubin said there hasn't been much debate on the issue in the District, even when rates were raised recently, because the costs are almost all borne by insurance companies or the federal government through Medicare and Medicaid. Just "3 percent came out of anyone's family budget," Rubin said. Most of that was small co-pays, he added.

Rubin called the fee "the only responsible thing to do for our communities."

In Fairfax, as in the Montgomery proposal, the county waives co-pays for county residents, said Fairfax Chief Ronald Mastin. "Our overall EMS call volume has not decreased since we introduced EMS billing in 2005," Mastin said. "It's really had no impact. It's been a win-win for us ever since we implemented it."

Billing for ambulance service has been most controversial in fire systems that have both career staff and volunteers, Mastin said, adding that Fairfax worked closely with its volunteers to get buy-in on the system.

Stafford chief Brown said "our volunteers have not seen any reductions . . . in any of their fund-raising efforts."

Prince George's also found a way around any political deadlock with its volunteer firefighters. The county allows volunteer companies to decide whether they will take part

in the billing program. There are 38 volunteer companies, and 11 bill for ambulance service, just as career staff do, Jones said.

Under Montgomery's program, non-county residents without insurance would get a bill, but could have the fee waived under a hardship program covering those earning three times the federal poverty guideline or less. That's \$32,490 for an individual, or \$66,150 for a family of four.