

Controversy focuses on use of radio communication

By RONALD BARTIZEK
Post Staff

The March 7 accident in which a Harveys Lake woman was trapped in her car after it ran into the lake, and the incidents that followed, have created a controversy over whether the Back Mountain Communication Center has a responsibility to answer calls of an urgent nature regardless of who they come from.

NEWS ANALYSIS

While John Martinson, the Harveys Lake fire chief, thinks the center should have answered his department's call for assistance, the center has maintained that it would risk destroying its financial base if it accepted radio calls from non-payers. And Martinson himself has said that the outcome of the March 7 accident would not have been different had the center responded.

The four municipalities that belong to the CommCenter pay \$17,502 each yearly for service

rendered to their police departments. The eight member fire departments pay \$1,500 yearly and were assessed \$600 when the center began.

The focus of the question is on response to requests by radio, since CommCenter personnel say the expense of installing the facility's radio equipment was the reason paying fire department memberships were initiated. In the case of Harveys Lake, for example, the police department is a member but the fire department is not. Therefore, the police use the CommCenter's extensive radio facilities, while the fire department must call on the telephone if it requires assistance.

According to Hugh Gallagher, rescue captain of the Kingston Township Ambulance Association, that is exactly how things were done for everyone before the CommCenter went on line last year. "If you are a non-member, you call Medic 1 (the mobile intensive care unit), on the telephone, just like before the CommCenter started,"

Center members are careful to point out that they don't want the issue to escalate into a war between them and Harveys Lake

Gallagher said Sunday. The Kingston Township ambulance group is the only independent ambulance department in the Back Mountain, Gallagher said, so it belongs to the CommCenter directly rather than as part of a fire company.

Gallagher, like other center members, was eager to point out that the center was not interested in a battle with the Harveys Lake fire department over the service. "We're not trying to get into an argument with Harveys Lake," he said. "We're just saying that we are very pleased with the center's service."

Gallagher said that use of the CommCenter had cut the dispatch time for his rescue units in half. And he estimated the real cost of his group's annual dues at only \$300 to \$400, since

using the center's facilities has reduced telephone and radio costs.

If Luzerne County's system was equal to that of most other counties, the Back Mountain center might not even exist, Gallagher said. "Luzerne County is 20 years behind the times," he commented. "Most other counties have countywide dispatching."

All member fire and police departments of the CommCenter who were contacted by The Post echoed Gallagher's satisfaction with the CommCenter's performance, and supported its policy of not responding to non-member's calls. "It's like having state-of-the-art equipment against 20-year-old equipment," said Jack Dodson, fire chief in Kunkle and president of the Back Mountain Firemen's

Association. Dodson said Sunday that the eight fire departments that belong to the CommCenter would release a joint statement Wednesday. While he would not comment on the content of the statement, Dodson had said earlier that all members were pleased with the center and supported its position in the March 7 incident.

Nesbitt Memorial Hospital's mobile intensive care unit, Medic 1, was the object of Harveys Lake's call on March 7. The hospital reportedly pays \$10,000 a year to the center to act as a base radio station for Medic 1. Members of the CommCenter may call the center on the radio when requesting assistance from the unit, and the center then dispatches Medic 1. Non-members must call for Medic 1 on a phone line, which rings simultaneously at the CommCenter and at the Medic 1 garage.

Kevin Ross, associate administrator of Nesbitt

Hospital, said last week that he has some questions about the present CommCenter policy of not responding to non-member calls. "Overall, we are happy with the way the system works," he said. "There are some philosophical differences. Hospitals in general respond to any emergency; the patient's got to come first," he continued.

Ross said, however, that one of the reasons the hospital joined the center was their understanding that only members would be served. "In principle we support the Back Mountain Communications Center and the principle of having a communications network," Ross said.

Inquiries to the Luzerne and Wyoming county communication centers revealed that they both answer all calls received. Both of those centers are entirely tax supported, and that makes a difference, say members of the Back Mountain center.

Harveys Lake fire company turns down offer of funds to join CommCenter

By SCOTT CRISPELL
Post Correspondent

Several members of the Daniel C. Roberts Volunteer Fire Company attended the Harveys Lake Borough Council meeting last Tuesday to announce that they do not wish to join the Back Mountain Communications Center.

Fire Chief John Martinson told council members that a major reason that D.C. Roberts decided not to join is a matter of policy.

"Right now," said Martinson, "the policy with the communications center is that if you don't pay an annual fee, they will sit there while your house burns down. I think that policy is despicable."

Ambulance Captain Frank Lutinski echoed Martinson's feelings. "The original intent of the communications center was that of mutual aid," Lutinski said. "They have lost the original intent of the mutual aid concept."

"They refuse to talk to us because we don't pay," Lutinski continued. "I don't like the idea at all. Until they get their policy straightened out, I can't see why Harveys Lake should join."

Martinson and the fire company received the complete support of the council although there were some questions concerning the matter.

"I think they're doing a fantastic job," said council chairman Ed Kelly. "Council will back whatever decision you make."

However, councilman Joseph Sgarlat asked the question that was on everyone's mind. "If we did belong to the communications center, would the outcome of this accident have been any different?" he asked.

"They have lost the original intent of the mutual aid concept"

Frank Lutinski
Harveys Lake Ambulance Captain

Sgarlat was referring to the accident of March 7 when a car driven by Judy Davis, the wife of a Harveys Lake fireman, plunged into the lake and she was trapped inside her car.

The dispatcher at the Back Mountain Communications Center refused to transfer a radio call to Nesbitt Hospital's Medic 1 unit because the Harveys Lake fire department is not a paying member of the center. Davis has been in critical condition at Wilkes-Barre General Hospital since the accident.

Martinson responded to the question with a simple but definite, "No."

Martinson wanted to make it perfectly clear that the D.C. Roberts is doing an outstanding job without being a member of the communication center.

"I want to reassure all Harveys Lake residents that their lives aren't in danger because we aren't a member," said Martinson.

Rich Williams, a trustee of the fire company, agreed with Martinson. "We feel we are handling ourselves very effectively," said Williams. "We know council will support our decision. I hope people don't feel that they aren't being properly serviced."

Martinson also urged the council to inspect the policy of the communication center to which Harveys Lake pays \$17,000 annually for their police department's membership.

While the fire company received support for their decision, officials feel that it is necessary for the police department to belong to the communication center.

Mayor Joseph Boyle said, "It's a necessity for the police. It is a tremendous cost, but it would cost us even more to have our own. As far as the police are concerned, the communications center has been excellent. We need it to protect the citizens of Harveys Lake."

Dispute

(continued from page 1)

quire that a department replace its paging equipment at substantial cost.

"We spent \$5,000 on radio equipment the same year the CommCenter started," said Martinson. "What were we supposed to do, spend another \$8,000 over the next five years?" he asked. He said there were other issues at the time, including what would happen if one of the member municipalities were to pull out at some point. "There were lots of issues, not just economic ones," he said.

When asked if the Harveys Lake fire department would consider joining the CommCenter now, Martinson declined to answer, saying that after last week's Borough Council meeting the department's trustees had met and decided to make no more comments on the issue.

In addition to the cost of the equipment, the center has an annual operating budget of nearly \$100,000, most of which is for dispatchers' salaries. The center is manned around the clock, and Viers said that many times the volume of calls creates a need for two dispatchers. If that happens now, members usually send one of their personnel to the center to assist.

While the police departments' annual payments cover the operating costs of the center, the fire departments' contribution mainly pays for the radio equipment. "We have the latest and best equipment," Jack Dodson, head of the Back Mountain Firemen's Association said last week.

Dodson, like other members of the CommCenter, maintains that serving non-members would destroy the financial integrity of the center. "I feel we're doing this for the most people; somehow we have to pay for it," he said. "We are going to continue to do for the largest number of participants and see that the most people get the best service."

The issue of dues paying mem-

bership is taken seriously by participating departments because they fear that if the center responds to non-member's calls, there is no incentive to join and the whole concept falls apart. "They (non-members), think they can do the same as a member. If that's the case, I may as well pull out and get the same service," said Hugh Gallagher, rescue captain of the Kingston Township Ambulance Association, a member of the CommCenter.

But members are also quick to point out that they would accept Harveys Lake, or any other non-member. "There is no animosity towards Harveys Lake," said Viers. "We would accept them with open arms if they wanted to join."

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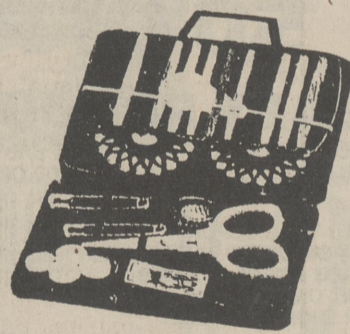
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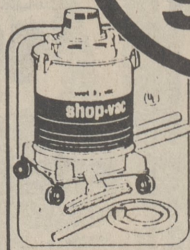
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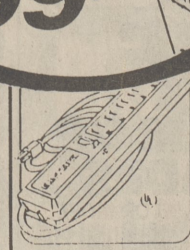
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