



BLUE CROSS FOUNDATION GRANT SPOTLIGHT

# Teens step up to save lives as First Responders, EMTs

Jodi McGaffey, manager of  
ELEAH Medical Center  
Ambulance Service

**A**s the manager of ELEAH Medical Center Ambulance Service — working with residents in west central Minnesota — Jodi McGaffey knows all too well the challenges involved with recruiting volunteer emergency medical technicians (EMTs). “Responding to emergencies can be stressful, time-consuming work,” McGaffey says. “Since we’re in a rural area, most of our ambulance services are volunteer based and, therefore, pretty short staffed. Plus, we’ve got a fairly large elderly

population, and the younger people with families are already overburdened with commitments.”

When McGaffey heard about the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota Foundation’s New Times, New Tools grants program — a funding initiative designed to help strengthen rural health care services by improving organizational effectiveness — she decided to apply. Her goal? Recruit and train local high-school students to become EMTs.

[ by Rebecca Lunna | photography by John Noltner ]



The ELEAH Medical Center Ambulance Service began implementation in January 2004, after receiving the \$10,000 foundation grant. The program was limited to 15 students, with training costs of about \$700 each. Despite the intense training and a required two-year commitment for participants, the program was full.

Much of the training took place over the course of a semester. Students met with members of local ambulance services, who taught classes for an hour and a half each day. And to prepare students for the dramatic difference

between classroom “smarts” and field “know-how,” evening hours were also required for field trips involving the rescue of pseudo-victims from a local pool or a car, with the help of the local fire department. The student group even visited a cadaver lab at the local university.

“I was so impressed with this group,” McGaffey says. “While these students were studying for their certification exam, their friends were out having fun. They were high achievers, but they were dedicated beyond that, and the scores they received showed they really worked hard.”

To become certified, the students must complete a state test of practical skills and then a national exam, which they cannot take until they turn 18. Until then, they can be certified to work as First Responders — a level below EMT — who are trained to provide basic emergency care until the EMTs arrive. However, McGaffey knew that even before her students completed the national certification, the program would greatly benefit the local ambulance service. “Just by doing this program, we really got our service out into the public space, and we were able to show people who we are and what we’re all about,” she says. “That makes our job of recruiting volunteers just a little bit easier.”

Though the training may take on a different focus in the future, McGaffey hopes to train more students and is currently working with five students from West Central Area High School to get a First Responder student group set up within the school in case of emergencies. “It was great to get to know these students and to show them the possibilities that are out there,” she says. “A lot of these kids will get into emergency services once they go to college, and that’s going to be a benefit to the community that they’ll live in. Plus, getting your EMT credential is often a preferred background for going into other medical fields. This experience has opened the students’ eyes to a whole range of career options that are out there.”

Bridget Rustand was a student in the EMT class last year and took it to help her firm up her plans for college. “I wanted to be sure that I really wanted to go into the medical field, and I thought that this class would be a good way to see if it was the right fit,” says Rustand. It seems that it was. Rustand is a first-year nursing student at North Dakota State University. She spends her summers — and weekends during the school year — on call with the ELEAH squad. ©