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SLO COUNTY GRAND JURY  
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July 14, 2011

Lee Stephens, Foreperson  
San Luis Obispo County Grand Jury  
P.O. Box 4910  
San Luis Obispo, CA 93402

Report Title: *Emergency Medical Helicopters*

Report Date: May 2011

Response By: Joe Piedalue, Operations Director, San Luis Ambulance

## Background

San Luis Ambulance is a private, for profit ambulance transport provider that has served the citizens and visitors of the County of San Luis Obispo for over 50 years. San Luis Ambulance provides this service through a contract with the County of San Luis Obispo and with the oversight of the San Luis Obispo County Emergency Medical Services Agency. In 2010 San Luis Ambulance responded to 22,159 requests for service and transported 16,497 patients. San Luis Ambulance serves the majority of San Luis Obispo County except for the Northwestern area of the County serviced by the Cambria Community Healthcare District. Due to the geographic diversity within San Luis Obispo County the response area includes urban populations such as the City of San Luis Obispo, rural areas like the Oceano Dunes and remote areas such as the California Valley. These areas are serviced by eight response stations and eleven ambulances, all of which are staffed by at least one paramedic and an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) three hundred and sixty five days per year.

## Response to Grand Jury Findings

San Luis Ambulance is required by the Grand Jury to respond to findings 3, 6, 7 and 12.

**Finding 3** – *Policy 119 authorizes the Incident Commander, in consultation with the most medically-qualified first responder, to determine that a requested medical helicopter is not needed and to cancel the request.*

**San Luis Ambulance agrees with finding number 3.**

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**Finding 6** – *In medical emergency calls at the Dunes, the Policy 119 procedure for cancelling an emergency medical helicopter requested by the Incident Commander is often reversed and the most medically-qualified first responder (usually the ground ambulance paramedic) on scene, in consultation with the Incident Commander (usually a State Parks Ranger), determines whether or not the requested emergency medical helicopter is needed.*

**San Luis Ambulance partially agrees with finding number 6.**

**Comments:** It is true that the most medically-qualified first responder, typically the ground ambulance paramedic(s), in consultation with the Incident Commander, typically a State Parks Ranger, determines whether or not the requested emergency medical helicopter is needed. This is not so much a reversal of roles as it is collaboration between the most medically-qualified first responder and the Incident Commander. Because of this collaborative decision making process the patient receives the most prudent and best available transport mode for the given situation.

**Finding 7** – *The ground ambulance paramedics responding to medical emergencies at the Dunes do not make entries in their patient care records to confirm consultation with the Incident Commander or the determination by the Incident Commander that the emergency medical helicopter is not needed.*

**San Luis Ambulance agrees with finding number 7.**

**Finding 12** – *Policy 119 does not give paramedics or flight nurses any discretion to consult with an available and more medically-qualified authority and to obtain their authorization to deviate from Policy 119 based on the particular circumstances of a case.*

**San Luis Ambulance agrees with finding number 12.**

## **Response to Grand Jury Recommendations**

San Luis Ambulance is required by the Grand Jury to respond to recommendations 3 and 7.

**Recommendation 3** – *EMSA should require that ground ambulance paramedics include in patient care reports a confirmation that they consulted with the Incident Commander. The note should identify the Incident Commander and confirm that the Incident Commander decided the helicopter was not needed following consultation. (Finding 7)*

**Recommendation number 3 requires further analysis.**

**Comment:** Although San Luis Ambulance disagrees with this recommendation, as a provider of emergency services regulated by the San Luis Obispo County Emergency Medical Services Agency (EMSA), we cannot solely determine what policies the San Luis Obispo County EMSA determines to be acceptable.

The patient care report is a legal document that follows the patient throughout their continued medical care with its intended use being a document of fact for all further care providers to refer to and use for continued medical treatment(s). It is the opinion of San Luis Ambulance that the patient care report should be a detailed description of the patient's mechanism of injury, history of illness, assessment findings and treatment modalities performed, and was not intended to record the operational components associated with the call in question. Instead of placing the information recommended by the Grand Jury on the patient's patient care report there are a number of avenues, listed below, that we might recommend to all involved to ensure that the Incident Commander was appropriately consulted.

- The San Luis Obispo County EMSA has two policies referring to the Quality Improvement (QI) programs available to all providers within San Luis Obispo County, including State Parks. San Luis Obispo County EMSA policies 109 and 110 outline the process for an individual or an agency to voice any concerns that they may have while running a particular call or an ongoing philosophical difference between individuals or agencies.
- Secondly, the San Luis Obispo County EMSA has a Quality Improvement Work Group where these same types of concerns can be vetted. Although it has been quite awhile, and the decision would have to come from the San Luis Obispo County EMSA, we feel that it would be a good idea to bring a representative from State Parks back to the Quality Improvement Work Group.

San Luis Ambulance feels that it is important for all to realize that San Luis Ambulance is never the highest-ranking representative (or designee) on scene of the public service agency statutorily responsible for incident/scene management, but oftentimes San Luis Ambulance provides the most medically qualified first responder. San Luis Ambulance does agree that it is important to be a well integrated member of the Emergency Medical Services (EMS) community, including our role in the Incident Command System. With that in mind, San Luis Ambulance trains all of its responders in the Incident Command System, including their role and the roles of the other responders. San Luis Ambulance often trains with a multitude of other agencies within San Luis Obispo County to ensure that we understand our role within the Incident Command System and that with these drills we are better prepared when we are requested to interact during a "live" event. Further, we also respond to over 22,000 calls for service within the County where the Incident Command System is being utilized. Given the concerns of the State Parks Rangers that have come to light in this report, it is obvious that additional training or discussion regarding what may be philosophical differences should occur between San Luis Ambulance and the State Parks Rangers. By working through these perceived differences and working closely together while training, all parties will benefit, especially the patients that we serve. San Luis Ambulance will contact the State Parks Rangers to be sure that this additional dialogue and training occurs.

With this overview of San Luis Ambulance's Incident Command System training and experience in mind, we do agree that it is important to interact and collaborate with the Incident Commander when medical transport decisions are being made.

**Recommendation 7** – *EMSA should consider revising Policy 119 to allow ground ambulance paramedics or flight nurses discretion to deviate from time and need criteria after consultation with, and approval of, the Base Station physician so that strict adherence to Policy 119 does not preclude appropriate patient care in unique situations. (Finding 12)*

**Recommendation number 7 requires further analysis.**

**Comment:** Although San Luis Ambulance disagrees with this recommendation, as a provider of emergency services regulated by the San Luis Obispo County EMSA, we cannot solely determine what policies the San Luis Obispo County EMSA determines to be acceptable.

San Luis Ambulance's opinion is that by taking the time, which could be significant in length, to consult with a Base Station physician regarding a deviation from the time and need criteria, would be counterproductive. The primary advantage of utilizing a helicopter for the transport of a patient from the scene of an emergency to a hospital is the speed in which the helicopter can accomplish the task.

Additionally, there are defined medical and trauma parameters, delineated in Policy 119 that have been discussed and agreed upon by all of the stakeholders within the County of San Luis Obispo, which are sufficient in guiding the patient's transport mode and destination. This standing orders concept ensures the timeliest delivery of the patient to the most appropriate facility. By working under the standing orders that Policy 119 affords, paramedics and flight nurses can rapidly assess the situation and then begin the transport, saving valuable time getting the patient to the hospital.

## **Summary**

As the largest provider of emergency responses in San Luis Obispo County, San Luis Ambulance takes its role very seriously. San Luis Ambulance realizes that emergency medical care is best delivered by a team of well trained individuals, regardless of their agency affiliation, and although we feel that medicine is delivered at a very high standard in San Luis Obispo County, there is always room for improvement.

San Luis Ambulance applauds the efforts of the Grand Jury in reporting on this very complex component of pre-hospital care and will continue to work closely with all of the allied agencies, hospitals and organizations we partner with to ensure that we continue providing the excellent medical care that the citizens and visitors of San Luis Obispo County expect and deserve.