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AMED has gained a statewide reputation

In a world of acronyms, AMED has experienced incredible growth. From its early days it has evolved to Altoona Logan Township Mobile Medical Emergency Department Authority. That's far from its most impressive growth or the remarkable impact it has made throughout the region and the commonwealth.

"People probably don't know as much about us as they think," acknowledges Gary Watters, AMED's Executive Director/EMS Chief. "They're amazed when they hear or read something about us. We intentionally don't share too much about what we accomplish."

The accomplishments are many. Perhaps the most notable is that AMED has had the second fastest ambulance response of any county in Pennsylvania for the past three years.

"We have a dedicated staff with an outstanding commitment to service," Watters pointed out. "So often that has made a difference."

That staff, remarkably, consists of 101 employees and 27 sub-contracted volunteers. That allows AMED to provide Emergency Medical Services for 23 municipalities in portions of Blair, Bedford, Huntingdon, Cambria and Centre counties. The primary response area covers more than 500 square miles with a population of more than 109,000. AMED has eight EMS stations and 24 EMS vehicles.

In 2021, AMED received more than 23,500 calls for service. It also transported 415 patients to hospitals outside its coverage area. It is the largest EMS service provider in Central Pennsylvania. That was not by accident.

AMED was originally established in 1968 as a service within the Altoona Hospital. In 1980, the hospital decided to no longer provide funding. In response, the City of Altoona and Logan Township created a municipal authority and in 1981 the hospital

transitioned the paramedics, ambulances and equipment to the authority.

AMED is a state-licensed Emergency Medical Service Agency and a licensed Emergency Medical Education Institute. It provides medical treatment and transportation in both 911 response and non-emergency situations. It transports people to medical appointments, provides standby coverage at private and community events, does emergency medical training and conducts community education, such as CPR courses. That's a lot to do. It's no surprise then that staffing challenges rate a high priority.

"As we all know, the unwillingness of people to work has caused wage inflation," Watters explains. "AMED, like many other businesses, must compete for employees at much higher pay rates. However, unlike a traditional business, AMED has no ability to pass-on those additional costs. Seventy-five percent



As Executive Director at AMED, Gary Watters has helped to create new opportunities for the Authority, particularly in terms of education.

of AMED's revenue comes from Medicare and Medicaid. We receive no support from local taxes. The recruitment process is not a level playing field."

A new AMED facility has played a huge role in the hiring process.

"We've been approved as an Education Institute," Watters disclosed. "This gives us the flexibility to hire untrained people, who we can then train. Educating and preparing these employees increases the opportunities that they'll be

with us for the long term. That's important as we set long-term goals for better serving our municipalities and playing an even more important role within our healthcare system." (AMED has been a Chamber member since 1982.)

Tackling the challenges of early childhood

For more than a decade, the Blair County Chamber has operated a subcommittee through its BASICS program that looks for more effective ways to deal with the challenges to Early Childhood Education. While those challenges have been substantial, they have increased monolithically as the result of Covid-19.

"With all the consequences that have arisen as the result of the pandemic, I'm not sure that the issues of childcare and early education haven't been the factors most difficult to overcome," admitted Rodney Green, who chairs the subcommittee. "Clearly, the business community has been impacted and continues to struggle to regain some degree of footing."

To get a better sense of where things currently stand, the subcommittee hosted a symposium on April 6th. Twenty-two participants, mostly childcare providers and local educators, spent more than two hours examining data and looking for solutions to problems that have no easy answers.

"Beyond the inconsistencies of preparing for young people to return to the provider agencies, the greatest challenges within the childcare realm have been staffing," Green acknowledged. "The symposium provided a deeper dive into what the staffing issues are. Providers understand that



Early childhood providers and local educators brainstormed ways to help offset the challenges that have made it difficult for the industry to bounce back.

they can't compete financially with many other industry sectors. So they need to plot a different course."

That course centers on how to get more people with passion into the childcare field. That starts with creating greater awareness of the importance of what that field entails. That's where, Green believes, the school districts play a major role.

"As young people explore career opportunities, it's essential that they know where those opportunities can be found close to home," he pointed out. "With the help of the

schools and the other BASICS subcommittees, that information will be more readily available."

The school district representatives who attended the symposium were confident that the schools would be willing to assist.

"The schools understand the critical nature of early childhood education," remarked Brian Keagy, an elementary principal in the Hollidaysburg Area School District. "Children who come to our schools from our local early childhood programs are ready to start school. That's a huge advantage."

Still, so much of what it takes to assure the success of early childhood programs is tied to cost.

"Subsidies and wages need to both go up and they're not currently linked," explained Dan Hoover, a local business leader who has served for many years as a board member of Child Advocates of Blair County. "That needs to change for any real progress to take place."

Green agreed. "The symposium allowed us to flesh-out some important issues that we'll be confronting for the foreseeable future. We're actually looking forward to it."

So what's the Catch? Campaign in full swing

The Blair County Chamber's effort to increase its membership by incentivizing current members to assist with the recruiting process is a logical strategy, according to Alex Seltzer of Manpower who sits on the Membership Committee.

"The Chamber staff is effective in letting members know the benefits of membership but it's really the members themselves who are the most effective recruiters," Seltzer pointed out. "People who believe in the mission and who enjoy the benefits of belonging speak with greater passion and authority."

The 2022 Membership Campaign, dubbed "Catch 22," highlights the importance of the role that members play in helping the Chamber to gain the support necessary to advance initiatives that ultimately benefit the entire business community.

"With all the challenges that our business community faces, it's more impor-



tant than ever that we get greater participation from a high percentage of our businesses rather than counting on less than half," Seltzer emphasized. "It's a heavy lift. We need help."

Catch 22 offers \$50 in gift cards to any Chamber member who recruits a non-member and then follows the process of that recruitment to its completion.

"It's an opportunity to make a difference and also gain from the experience," Seltzer admitted. "A \$50 incentive for each recruited member is a pretty good deal. It also helps the members who are supplying the gift cards."

(For more information, contact Jessie Covert at 814-943-8151 or email at jcovert@blairchamber.com.)

It's Happening at the Blair County Chamber

- The Blair County Chamber's Young Entrepreneurs Academy (YEA!) will hold a trade show tomorrow at 6:00 p.m. at PNG Field during the Altoona Curve's game against New Hampshire. Nine YEA! businesses will be on-hand to let the ballgame crowd see the outstanding additions to the Blair County business community.

- The Highmark/Chamber Golf Classic, which will be held on May 19th, is completely sold out. All 144 spots have been filled and a waiting list has been created. There are still tee-and-green sponsorships available. To purchase one of those, contact Jessie Covert at (814) 943-8151 or email jcovert@blairchamber.com.

- The Chamber's Membership Directory & Community Resource Guide has been distributed to Chamber members and a limited number of copies are available for those who request an additional copy. The publication is an outstanding way to access information on Blair County as well as the Chamber itself and its members.

- The Chamber Alliance Trade Show is on hold for another year. The event, which brings together the Blair County Chamber and the Chamber of Business & Industry of Centre County, was to be held September 28th at the Blair County Convention Center. A number of unavoidable conflicts will push the Trade Show into 2023.

BLAIR COUNTY CHAMBER of COMMERCE

HALL OF FAME

AND AWARDS OF DISTINCTION

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