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Pittsylvania County bolstering public safety with CARES Act money

CHATHAM -- Pittsylvania County is creatively using \$2.7 in federal funds from the CARES Act to bolster both its career and volunteer fire and rescue operations. Just under \$1.1 million has been allocated for the purchase of five ambulances that would be split between the volunteer agencies and the Pittsylvania County Public Safety Department.

"We have utilized CRF funds for strategic investments that improve the level of service we can offer our citizens not only during this pandemic, but for years to come," said Pittsylvania County Administrator David Smitherman. "These ambulances, along with the other equipment we've purchased, will allow our career and volunteer first responders to coordinate better and improve our emergency response time and quality."

The ambulances will be stationed with:

- Chatham Rescue Squad
- County Public Safety staff in Chatham
- Mt. Hermon Rescue Squad and County Public Safety Staff
- Brosville Rescue Squad
- Callands Rescue Squad

"We are going to replace ambulances that have had serious mechanical problems and haven't been reliable," said Pittsylvania County Public Safety Director Chris Slemph. "Having additional space and better HVAC systems in these ambulances will also allow us to better protect our staff when working with potential and confirmed positive COVID-19 patients."

After being offered an ambulance through CARES Act funds, the Tunstall Rescue Squad has elected to purchase an ambulance themselves instead. Along with all capital expenses in Pittsylvania County, a scheduled allocation of \$90,000 for the purchase of a new ambulance at Tunstall was frozen due to the uncertainty around COVID-19—a fact that has concerned Tunstall Chief Troy Tolley.

“It seems there is enough money in Chatham to keep hiring people with menial jobs,” he said in an email opting out of the ambulance. “We were offered an ambulance through the CARES ACT federal funds... but we elected to go with our original plans that we started in January to meet the needs of the citizens we serve.”

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act is a federal stimulus bill passed in late March that sent money through all levels of the economy in response to the economic fallout caused by COVID-19. Through that bill, Pittsylvania County received \$10.5 million in funds to use on expenses that weren't in the original budget and can be directly attributed to COVID-19. Part of the goal in purchasing these ambulances is to ensure that each of Pittsylvania County's first due EMS vehicles, volunteer or otherwise, will be less than five years old. Each of the new ambulances will have great air circulation systems, UV lighting that kills bacteria, and increased space for working with patients.

In addition to buying ambulances, Pittsylvania County bought multiple quick response vehicles that improve response time and allocated \$500,000 for the construction of a new EMS station in Hurt. Additionally, all EMS agencies have received medical supplies, medications and equipment as well purchased with CARES funds. An online fire and rescue training program was purchased that allows volunteer to take classes remotely.

To go along with a wide range of technology improvements and new medical equipment, Pittsylvania County also allocated a significant amount of money for personal protection equipment that allow first responders to safely work with COVID patients. During the COVID-19 pandemic, volunteer and paid EMS staff in Pittsylvania County have gone on calls for hundreds of patients who were showing symptoms of COVID-19, and many of those went on to test positive for the respiratory virus.

“The county has used quite a bit of Coronavirus Relief Fund (CRF) money to assist with Volunteer Fire and Rescue as well as Public Safety,” said Bryan Fox, Chairman of the Pittsylvania County Fire and Rescue Commission and a volunteer with Mt. Cross Volunteer Fire and Rescue. “All of these resources will benefit the citizens of Pittsylvania County when emergencies arise.”