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Forks squad back in business

Financial problems led to suspension of emergency service.

By Matt Assad Of The Morning Call

In its 34-year history, Forks Township Emergency Squad members saved a lot of lives, but the save they made Sunday might have been some of their best work.

After \$278,000 in debt closed the squad nine months ago, members were back on duty Sunday with a new business plan and renewed hope that their troubles were in the past.

"It's taken a long time to get back to this point," Squad President William Keifer Jr. said as he stopped several times to choke back tears during a ceremony at the squad's Sullivan Trail building. "But I'm really excited to be here to say Station 25 is back in service."

There was a time when Keifer worried Sunday would never come. The squad suspended service in July 2006 as it collapsed under the weight of its debt. Members had no indication the nonprofit organization was in trouble until emergency medical technician Kyle Wenner went to put gas in one of the ambulances and a squad credit card was denied. Two days later, Wenner and his colleagues were out of work and the squad was closed for the first time since it opened in 1972.

Nearby Suburban EMS in Palmer Township has been covering its area since then.

"One day we're going out to calls and the next we're all out of work," Wenner said. "It was that sudden. None of us had any idea."

It was later discovered that the squad's debt had ballooned, and it had \$700,000 in uncollected fees for services, most of which are too old to ever be recovered. Former squad director Cory S. Dailey of Fountain Hill was eventually charged with stealing more than \$21,000 and using the squad credit card to buy items for her home.

Since then, the squad has consolidated its debt, taken out a \$50,000 line of credit and collected more than \$75,000 on the delinquent accounts, Keifer said.

As of Sunday, 10 of the squad's 30 full- and part-time workers from last year were back on the job, and six more will likely be brought back next month, said Keifer's son, Michael Keifer, who is the new squad director. Most of the others have taken jobs elsewhere.

Perhaps more encouraging is that more than 1,200 people have signed up as subscribers -- a number Keifer said is more than the squad had before it suspended service.

Some of those people showed up Sunday to eat free hot dogs and watch Keifer and son sign on for duty for the first time in nine months.

Some people, such as Erik Chuss, a township planning commissioner, showed up with his \$65 annual fee for a subscription.

"I'd never really thought about subscribing before, but I figured they need our support," Chuss said. "They've served our community for a long time. I thought it was important to be here for them now."

Of course, how long they're back in business will be determined by how well the squad has rebuilt its financial house. It is licensed to provide basic life support service in Forks Township and the surrounding area 24 hours a day. But Suburban EMS will be called in for advanced life support calls such as heart attacks, or patients that require the EMS to administer medicine.

Keifer said he hopes the single-crew shifts will be expanded to two crews per shift next month, and a new squad board will tighten

its bylaws so that it doesn't find itself in a similar situation later.

"Just because we're back doesn't mean the hard work is over," Keifer said. "But at least the fun has begun. We're back."

matthew.assad@mcall.com

610-861-3617

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