

Rural Rescue

There's more to providing first aid in a small town than just

fiddling with high-tech rescue gear. by DAVID GOODMAN

WHEN I LIVED IN BOSTON IN THE 1980s, I didn't worry much about emergency services. I took for granted that when I called 911, a police, fire, or ambulance crew would be at my door within minutes.

That assumption changed when I moved to Waterbury, Vermont, in 1991. There was no 911 to call, no anonymous uniformed figures dispatched from central offices who responded to crises with professional detachment. There were only my neighbors.

I was unsure how a newly arrived young flatlander would be received when I inquired about volunteering as an emergency medical technician (EMT) for the Waterbury Ambulance Service. But the squad welcomed me and within a few weeks assigned me a radio and a 6:00 A.M. to 6:00 P.M. shift.

I discovered quickly that there was more to providing first aid in a small town than fiddling with high-tech rescue gear. A volunteer ambulance squad offers patients something no EMT textbook had ever taught me: community. Squad members are familiar faces to those whom they serve. It might be a colleague, a friend, or even a relative who shows up when the ambulance is called.

Those connections are at once the strength and the vulnerability of small-town ambulance squads. I dread the possibility of getting called to my daughter's day care or to an accident involving a close friend. So far, I haven't had to find out.

But I have been touched by the enormous effort neighbors make to help one another. My very first run with Waterbury Ambulance coincided with the season's first winter storm. My walkie-talkie barked that a 68-year-old man might be having a heart attack and gave directions to a house high in the

Worcester Mountains that cradle the town.

As I struggled to drive up the icy road to the man's house, the concerned voice of ambulance driver Dave Luce suddenly came over the radio. "I don't know if the ambulance can make it up there. The roads are really bad."

Just then, the unmistakable gruff accent of an old Vermonter cut in on the radio. "You people in the ambulance hold on up there. I'll be right over." Another voice piped in, "I'm on my way, too."

Suddenly, what seemed like a wall of shimmering orange lights burst through the vortex of white. It was Howard Ripley of the town highway department behind the wheel of a giant snowplow. Seconds later, another plow thundered past. He and his partner had heard the distress calls of the ambulance crew and decided to turn their efforts to saving the old man up on the mountain.



The curious parade of plows, cars, and an ambulance snaked slowly uphill. Red, orange, and yellow lights danced off the snow. At the top of a steep rise, a weathered white clapboard house appeared on the right; a woman in a wool jacket waved anxiously from the snow-covered porch. The plows roared up the driveway and came to a halt, snarling and belching as they idled. Four of us on the ambulance crew trotted inside, followed by the plow drivers.

An elderly gentleman was sitting up in bed as we came into his bedroom. His daughter stood over him, gently helping him pull on a well-worn red-checked jacket over his pajamas. The man looked frail and scared. But as familiar faces appeared in his living room, he seemed to relax just a bit. He even managed a faint smile.

"It's real nice to see you folks," he whispered. □ □