

South Carolina firefighters respond to more medical emergencies than fires

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Rod German was surprised to see firefighters respond to his mother's home when the 86-year-old woman fell getting out of the shower last fall.

"There was no fire," he said. "I didn't expect a firetruck, but that's who got there first." The first responders who arrived at Libby German's Charleston home were able to tend to her until emergency medical services arrived to transport her to Roper St. Francis.

Over the past decade or so, the role of fire departments across the nation has changed. Fewer calls are fire-related while medical emergency calls are on the rise.

Medical calls are growing so much that some departments are taking a second look at whether they should respond to all calls or if some of the more routine matters are better left to Emergency Medical Services, who also answer.

Big red fire engines at medical calls frequently elicit responses.

"Often when we get there people say 'What are you doing here? We called an ambulance,'" said North Charleston Fire Chief Greg Bulanow.

There's a simple reason that firetrucks often get to the scene first.

"There are more fire stations than EMS stations," said North Myrtle Beach Fire Chief Garry Spain. "We can get to the calls a lot quicker than an EMS truck can because we have stations throughout our city and communities. You don't have that when it comes to EMS. They are not as close together."

"It may be a call for something like the flu symptoms and we get there first, or it can be a gunshot and we get there first," said Capt. Brick Lewis of the Columbia Fire Department. Each day in South Carolina, fire departments answer 1,020 calls for service. Of those, 64 are for fires; 105 are false alarms; and 591 are medical or rescue calls, according to the 2016 report of the state National Fire Incident Reporting System program.

https://www.postandcourier.com/news/south-carolina-firefighters-respond-to-more-medical-emergencies-than-fires/article_bde528b8-06b8-11e8-bd94-cf909f946cb1.html

Nationally, only about 5 percent of calls that fire departments respond to involve fires, but about 65 are medical calls, according to the National Fire Protection Association. The result is that fire departments have become “all hazards” departments, with employees cross-trained to respond to fires, emergency medical incidents and hazardous materials incidents and more. Many are certified as emergency medical technicians who can perform CPR and provide other medical care.

Officials attribute the changing status to an aging population and uninsured or underinsured people who wait until there is an emergency to deal with a medical issue.

“All of that kind of falls on first responders in terms of providing medical care,” Bulanow said. “EMS and first responders have increasingly borne the brunt of that.”

The medical calls have become such a big percentage that some departments are now rethinking their response.

“We are trying to identify and respond to only those calls where we can make a difference,” Bulanow said. “If somebody needs help and we can make a difference, we want to be there, but if all we’re needed for is to sit and wait with them, there may be better use of our resources.” In addition, some departments use vehicles instead of firetrucks to respond to medical calls. North Charleston, for instance, can answer calls in a Quick Response Vehicle — an SUV equipped for medical emergencies that is manned by EMTs. The vehicles cut down on the wear and tear to firetrucks, are less expensive to operate, and get better gas mileage. Spain said he prefers to use the firetrucks.

“When you take firefighters off your engine or ladder truck, until you can get back to the station their engine is out of service,” he said. “They’d have to go all the way back to the station then go back.”