



ON THE SCENE

Covering EMS in Colorado

"All of us are ambulance drivers!"

Reprinted with permission from the May/June 2006 *EMSAC Star*

By Sean Caffrey, EMSAC President

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Melody Mesmer Receives National Hero Award

Congratulations to Melody Mesmer for receiving the 2006 EMS for Children National Hero Award for Family Member Volunteer of the Year. More information is available on [page 16](#) of this newsletter.

Greetings once again from the Office of the President in beautiful Frisco, Colorado. Spring in the Central Rockies is a wonderful season, when you'll never know what type of precipitation will fall from the sky next. As I begin to write one of my final columns as your Association President, I wanted to discuss a rather sensitive point. ALL OF US ARE AMBULANCE DRIVERS!

Now that I have your attention and you have retrieved the crumpled up *EMSAC Star* from the corner of the room you just threw it in, a few points: As I write this article, two Denver-area ambulance services have been involved in fatal crashes where three people have been killed and multiple others have been injured in the past week. This comes a couple of months after a western Colorado fire district destroyed a truck at a railroad crossing narrowly averting more tragedy. The bottom line is these incidents could have been prevented, people are dead and the public has lost confidence in our ability to serve them. So what's the point? It's great that you have gone to all that training to become a skilled Emergency Medical Services professional, but if you crash your vehicle, those skills are worthless to the patients we serve, or worse yet, harmful to them and the motoring public.

Take your ambulance driving skills seriously and don't forget this is the most visible part of our profession.

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Section Chief's Corner

By D. Randy Kuykendall

Ambulance Operations Safety: Everyone's Job

During the last few months, the Colorado EMS system has been graphically reminded of the dangers inherent in our profession. The deaths of three people in two separate ambulance crashes have served as a wake-up call to all EMS providers that we must be ever vigilant in our efforts to keep our patients and ourselves safe. These tragic events have focused the attention of the media and the public on the dangers of emergency vehicle responses in Colorado in a way that should cause every EMS agency leader, fleet manager and emergency medical technician to look for opportunities to improve operational safety on a daily basis.

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration¹, 170 people were killed during 2004 in emergency vehicle crashes of all types. An additional 18,772 people were injured in emergency vehicle crashes. Although the majority of these casualties were the drivers and passengers of civilian automobiles involved in accidents with emergency vehicles, nine of these fatalities were ambulance drivers. A study by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health reveals that the fatality rate for the Emergency Medical Services industry is 12.7 per 100,000 workers. This is more than double the fatality rate for all U.S. workers. According to the same study, between 1991 and 2000 there were 300 fatal crashes that involved 357 fatalities. Of this number, there were 82 ambulance occupant fatalities, of which 27 were EMS workers². The study states that less than half of the EMS workers used seatbelts in the patient compartment.

These are sobering statistics that must be acknowledged as our community takes on the challenge of improving the safety of EMS workers, drivers and patients in Colorado. The State Emergency Medical and Trauma Services Advisory Council has recognized this need and, through its Transportation Committee, has already begun discussing avenues that might be taken in our state to strengthen our collective safety awareness. It is our hope that all emergency response agencies will review their current vehicle operations and driver training policies to identify ways to enhance them. Such policies should include driver background checks, emergency vehicle operations policies and quality training programs that will ensure that our emergency medical professionals are as well-trained in their driving practices as they are in providing medical care. The public that we serve demands that both our medical practice and operational policies be consistent with the safest and highest quality practices.

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Section Chief
D. Randy Kuykendall

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We can't expect to earn respect as medical professionals if we fall down on the job while performing the basics. Driving is the most basic and most frequently performed skill we have, and there was a time in our history when it was the most admired of our skills. I can assure you that even today, if we fail as drivers, the results are disastrous for ourselves, our organizations and those we have harmed.

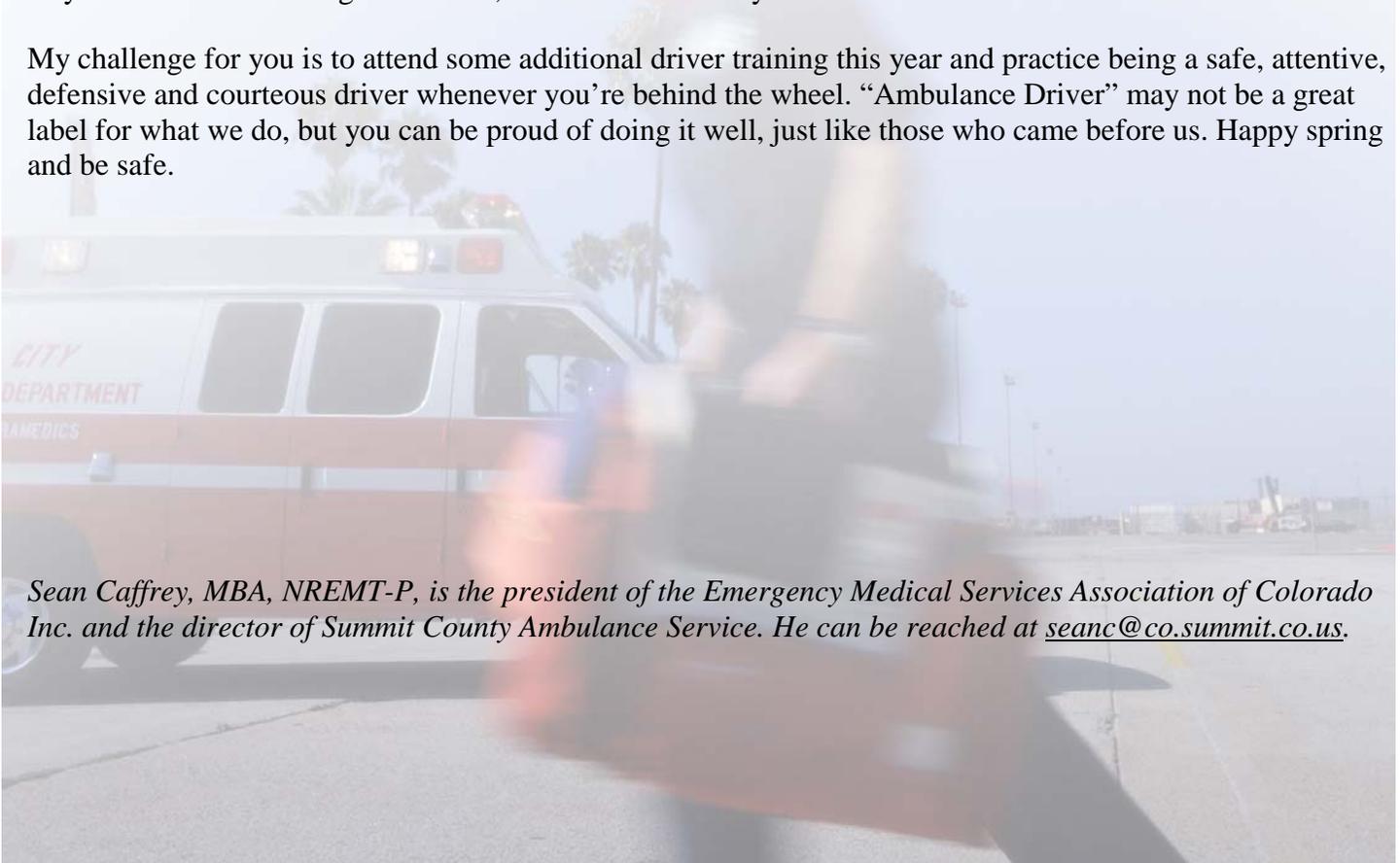
I would also like to point out that safe driving is both an individual and an organizational responsibility. It is up to the individual to drive defensively with due regard for the safety of ourselves, our crew, our patients and the public.

As we all know, those few seconds you save by driving too fast, or making that risky maneuver, are not worth it. I would also point out that instant feedback on bad driving behaviors is also the obligation of the EMS professional in the passenger seat.

It is also the responsibility of EMS leaders to create and enforce a culture of safe driving. We can't prevent everything and accidents do happen, but are we doing all we can to ensure that our organization has good training, equipment, policies and procedures in place to ensure our vehicles and our drivers are as safe as they can be? This is an area we can't afford not to invest in and we can't afford to ignore bad driving behaviors. We all hate to hear bad things about our driving—but don't we consider this a skill where we're way better than the average Joe? If so, then take it seriously.

My challenge for you is to attend some additional driver training this year and practice being a safe, attentive, defensive and courteous driver whenever you're behind the wheel. “Ambulance Driver” may not be a great label for what we do, but you can be proud of doing it well, just like those who came before us. Happy spring and be safe.

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NOTES

- **July SEMTAC meeting.** Thursday, July 27, 2006. Sabin-Cleere Room, Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, Denver, CO.
- **Public Health in Colorado Conference.** September 18-20, 2006. Vail, CO. www.coloradopublichealth.org.
- **October SEMTAC meeting.** Thursday, October 5, 2006. Sabin-Cleere Room, Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, Denver, CO.
- **State EMS Conference.** November 2-5, 2006. Keystone, CO. www.emsac.info

If you would like to receive this newsletter, please e-mail jeanne.bakehouse@state.co.us. We welcome comments and content suggestions.



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