

**NEWS**



From left is Chris Montera, Kevin Creek, Kate Hawthorne and Eric Gundlach of the Western Eagle County Ambulance District Community Paramedic program. Avery Cunliffe photo.

# Making more housecalls

## Paramedic program gains international attention

By Randy Wyrick  
Mountaineer Staff Writer

Local paramedics are on the cutting edge of a program to help keep uninsured patients out of hospital emergency rooms.

Community Paramedic is a Western Eagle County Ambulance District program being designed to bring basic medical care to the homes of the uninsured, keeping them out of hospital emergency rooms for non-urgent care.

If most stuff goes like it's supposed to, those paramedics can lighten the load for a shrinking number of primary care physicians. The paramedics will coordinate with local doctors to provide basic medical care in the patients' homes.

"They'll be an extension of the doctors' eyes and ears, working with public health nurses," said Anne Robinson with the Eagle County Board of Health.

Patients will not be charged for the service. The costs will be picked up by savings in other areas in the medical system, gained by keeping people out of emergency rooms for things like the flu and other common problems — things that are not emergencies.

The program is in a three-year pilot phase. After that they'll have the data they need to determine its success or failure, said Chris Montera with the Western Eagle County Ambulance District.

The idea is attracting international attention.

"We've never seen a program get off the ground this fast," said Chris Montera with WECAD. "The Community paramedic model could be a national model for delivering medical care to those who cannot access it."

The Mayo Clinic has taken notice and is sending Montera to New Zealand to help lay out plans for the program. They're also sending him to Kansas and Los Angeles. Interest from the U.K. and other parts of

Europe is high, but he won't be getting his passport stamped for those destinations.

Paramedics will start getting the additional training in January and should be ready to roll by mid summer. They'll need 100 hours of classroom training and another 100 hours of practical training, said Montera.

About the money

Robinson loves this idea, as does Dr. Drew Werner, also with the board of health. Robinson is a former nurse who's seen just about everything nurses see.

One of the things she saw recently was parents bring their 9-month old child to the emergency room with flu-like symptoms. After the third trip to the emergency, the hospital admitted the child, trying to put everyone's mind at ease, Robinson said. The child is fine, by the way.

The cost for that series of unfortunate events? \$17,000.

Community paramedic could have done all that for less than \$1,000, including fuel for the truck to get them to the house, Montera said.

In Eagle County, 26 percent of the population is uninsured, 46 percent in the Eagle River Valley. Among Latino households, 68 percent don't have medical insurance, according to the Eagle County board of health.

The Community Paramedics can help with such post-op followup, hospital discharge followup, helping the elderly remain in their homes for as long as possible by doing occasional home visits to make sure everything is safe. At the other end of that spectrum, they'll also do home visits for parents of newborns and toddlers, to make sure new parents have baby-proofed their homes.

"The program utilizes resources that we hadn't thought of before, in ways that will help the entire community," Robinson said. "It won't change the paramedics' traditional role, it will expand it.

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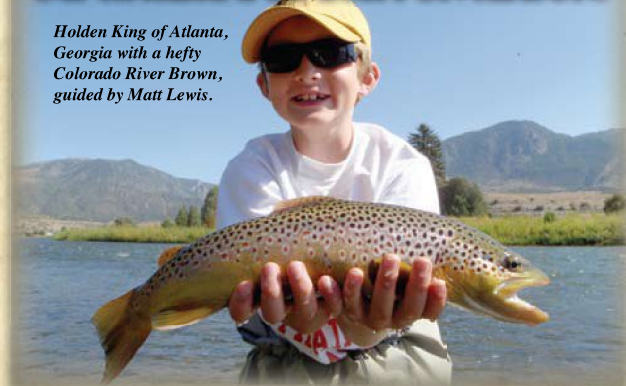
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