

BETTER GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION

FEBRUARY 19, 2013 07:00 AM

City Ambulances on Life Support?

Safety of ambulance fleet questioned after wheels, door fall off several vehicles. This is just the latest embarrassment for Chicago Fire Department.

By Patrick Rehkamp/BGA



Does the Chicago Fire Department's vehicle fleet need a stretcher for itself?

Perhaps, amid revelations that over the past several months ambulances have been unexpectedly falling apart – with several wheels and a door popping off in separate incidents while the vehicles were in use, the Better Government Association has learned.

In at least one instance, an ambulance lost a wheel while a patient was on board, being transported to a hospital on Jan. 15, fire spokesman Larry Langford confirmed.

The patient was unharmed, Langford said, declining to identify the person.

The incidents raise questions about the safety of the city's 100-plus ambulances, and whether taxpayer-funded maintenance crews are doing their jobs.

One fire department source familiar with the situation said things have never been so bad.

"It's ridiculous," he said. If the vehicle troubles persist, "we will not make it through the summer."

Chicago's Department of Fleet and Facilities Management, which maintains city vehicles, now is sending crews to all firehouses to check lug nuts on ambulance wheels and give extra attention to vehicles with more than 100,000 miles, fleet and facilities Commissioner David Reynolds told the BGA.

But the larger issue of the aging ambulance fleet remains. The city is now in the process of buying 25 new ambulances, Reynolds said.

"The average age of the City's ambulances is six years," Reynolds wrote in an email. "Given there are 10 ready reserves and a goodly number of spares available at any time, there's no reason why CFD should feel the need to go out in an ambulance believed to be mechanically unsound."

Tom Ryan, president of the union representing Chicago firefighters and paramedics, released the following statement in response to BGA questions:

Because the Chicago Fire Department does not maintain nor procure CFD vehicles, the Chicago Firefighters Union Local 2 brought this very serious ambulance wheel/tire failure issue directly to City officials. After consulting with Fleet Management and the CFD, the City promptly released a plan on February 8th 2013 to begin immediate inspections of all ambulances in the CFD fleet, making the necessary repairs. While this action addressed the problem in the short term, it must be noted that the entire Chicago Fire Department ambulance fleet is at or near 100,000 miles, making it a distinct possibility that vehicle wear and tear may be a significant factor in this situation. The safety of our citizens and our CFD personnel is paramount to Local 2 and it is our understanding that the purchase of 25 new ambulances is currently in the procurement process. However, we have called upon the City to monitor this issue more closely and strongly consider adding even more new ambulances to our CFD fleet.

The union is in the midst of contract talks with Mayor Rahm Emanuel's administration, which runs the fire department.

The vehicle troubles represent just the latest embarrassment for the fire department over the past year or more.

Last July the BGA reported that a city ambulance crew transported a man with a stab wound to the wrong hospital, putting him in potential peril.

In August, the BGA found that a fire engine had been carrying expired medication, even though routine checks were supposed to be in place. The discovery prompted a system-wide audit to make sure old and potentially unsafe medicines and materials weren't being used on patients.

And roughly a year ago the BGA reported that a high-ranking fire official was arrested for drunken driving and possession of a handgun – months after being part of a separate incident in which a fire department SUV accidentally rolled into a lagoon