

# Lake Area EMS Squads Answer the Call During Pandemic

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Photos by KAREN FUCITO

They are the first to arrive during some of our darkest times and on the front lines in just about any crisis. Most area emergency medical services are provided by volunteers, many who have enthusiastically stepped up during the COVID-19 pandemic without a second thought.

Mary Hookway, 61, of Lafayette, is a member of the Sparta Ambulance Squad and the 12th District Chair of the EMS Council of New Jersey. Established in 1929, the organization supports and promotes state volunteer emergency medical services. District 12 has 19 member squads from Morris and Sussex counties.

"There is a long tradition of volunteer emergency medical services in New Jersey and specifically in our area of northwest New Jersey," said Hookway. "Over the years, with the decrease in the amount of time that people in

the community have for volunteer endeavors, volunteerism on our squads has also decreased."

Many squads have adopted a hybrid model in which paid staff cover a portion of the hours, usually day shifts, and volunteers cover nights and weekends. "Our responsibility is to maintain a level of service that meets the communities' needs. When some squads found they weren't able to do that with 100% volunteer staff 24/7, they made the move to go with paid staff during the day," Hookway said.

A 30-year squad veteran, Hookway knows the importance of keeping those crews equipped and making sure every call is answered.

In the first months of the pandemic, everyone was scrambling for personal protective equipment, something that EMS personnel have depended on long before the rest of us knew what it was. Hookway said squads were concerned they wouldn't be able to get what they needed to stay safe and to keep their

patients safe. "The New Jersey Department of Health required a specific set of PPE for every crew member on a call since the beginning, so that was a strain," said Hookway.

"It's really made me proud how our organizations have stepped up and kept up with the requirements, the extra work, the extra care that it takes to do EMS during a pandemic," she said.

Some volunteers were unable to run calls because of underlying conditions. "But the people who were already on the job had more enthusiasm and stepped up to fill spots that other people couldn't," Hookway said.

Jefferson Township Rescue Squad's Chief Ron Anzalone, 64, of Lake Hopatcong said, his crew was on the first known COVID-19 call in the township in March 2020.

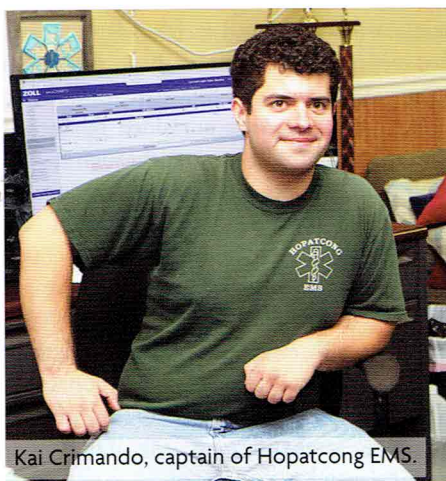
"Dispatch had a questionnaire and asked certain questions, so we knew we had a possible COVID patient," he said. After this call, the squad adjusted their protocol, ventilation symptoms and PPE. "This was a challenge for all first responders, but, as time went on, using different equipment, we were comfortable responding to calls."

Anzalone said his squad lost quite a few volunteers as the pandemic snuck into northern New Jersey. "People got afraid of it, and that's the worst thing, to be afraid," he said. "Just go with it, listen to the rules that we made, and you shouldn't have a problem. None of our members got COVID from being on the squad. That was the only good thing."

The Jefferson Rescue Squad has a core group of about 40 active members, including 15 EMTs and a stream of others who come and go. "The younger volunteers do it for experience



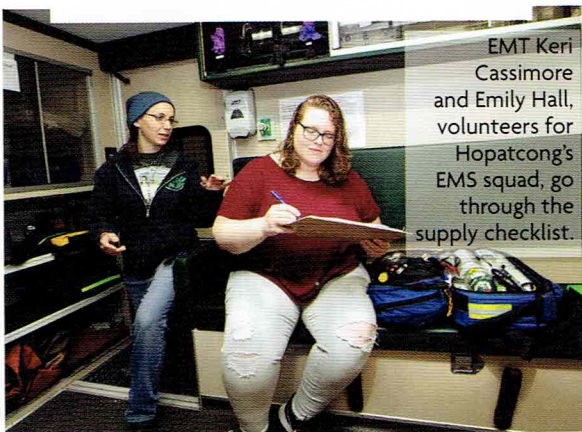
Mary Hookway prepares a bag of donated PPE for the Wallkill Valley EMS squad.



Kai Crimando, captain of Hopatcong EMS.



Jefferson Township Rescue Squad Chief Ron Anzalone, left, watches as members of his squad practice extracting a victim (played by squad member Camila Lucarelli) from the driver's seat of a car.



EMT Keri Cassimore and Emily Hall, volunteers for Hopatcong's EMS squad, go through the supply checklist.



while they go to school,” Anzalone said. “They use the squad for training and then get a real job.”

Roxbury Fire Company No. 1 EMS Captain Carl Bonafede, 56, of Succasunna, said most of his members have been able to continue to run calls during the pandemic and also have made it through without contracting the disease. However, the demands of a more stringent training program, which includes more than 240 hours of instruction and practical experience, have made it harder to recruit new volunteers.

Bonafede, who has been a firefighter and EMT for Company 1 for 38 years, said potential volunteers could be provided with incentives to make up for the out-of-pocket costs of becoming an EMT. “If the town provided a stipend for uniforms, reimbursement for fuel or even a property tax break, it might help,” he said.

Some EMTs simply don't need convincing. Hopatcong Ambulance Squad Captain Kai Crimando, 22, knew the role he was going to play in his community before he was old enough to take his first class. His parents met at Morristown Medical Center where his mother was a nurse. His father, a behavioral scientist, worked for the New Jersey Department of Health.

Following the 9/11 attacks, Crimando's father was called to assess the mental health of ground zero workers as well as the families of the victims. “When I was in middle school, he got really sick—he had three brain aneurysms and still struggles with COPD [chronic obstructive pulmonary disease],” Crimando said. “He was in and out of hospitals all the time, and it had a lot of impact on me, but he got so much help and I wanted to give back.”

Crimando joined the Hopatcong squad through a youth program when he was 15 and became a full member when he turned 18. At 21, he became the youngest captain in the history of the squad. He takes his contribution seriously, but it isn't always easy. “You are

dealing with your friends, your family, your neighbors and you are trying to save their lives, and it definitely takes a toll,” he said.

Not only that, but since his father is at high risk for COVID-19 with a respiratory condition, Crimando has to take extra steps to make sure he doesn't bring the disease home. He enters his home through a back door after his overnight shift and leaves his clothes, phone and keys in a separate container, all to be decontaminated before he starts his next shift. “I have a certain path from the back door to my room that I stick to.”

Prior to COVID-19 in Hopatcong, police officers were dispatched on most calls, but when the pandemic was at its peak, they came only when requested by the rescue squad—to reduce the chances of bringing the disease home to their own families, according to Crimando.

The 15 paid EMTs in Hopatcong are not employed by the borough, but, rather, the squad is a private business that bills for services and also supplements costs with donations. “People assume that we are town funded but we're not,” Crimando said.

“No one expected a pandemic to come but when we rose to the challenge it was a lot of work but very fulfilling,” Hookway said. The public was inspired by the work of healthcare workers and stepped up. “They contacted the organizations to offer to fundraise for them,

do yard work at the squad buildings,” she said. “There were grassroots groups that were trying to obtain PPE for us. The community became involved. Hopefully, we'll hold on to those people.”

“When you join an EMS or fire/EMS organization you become part of a large family,” Bonafede said. “They have each other's backs during good and bad times.”

The squads will often pay for certification classes and welcome recruits in a position to volunteer. “We really need people,” Crimando said. “Many of our members are taking care of family or friends, and volunteering is not paying the bills—not keeping their families safe.”

The 12th District of the EMSCNJ represents 19 squads, including approximately 205 active members of Hopatcong Ambulance Squad, Jefferson Township Rescue Squad, Lakeland Emergency Squad Inc., Roxbury Fire Company 1 First Aid Squad, Sparta Ambulance Squad and the Stanhope-Netcong American Legion Ambulance.

According to Hookway, in the most recent reporting year, those squads ran more than 5,200 calls.

For more information on how to train as a certified EMT or find other ways to donate or volunteer, visit: [www.NJSFAC-12th-District.org](http://www.NJSFAC-12th-District.org).



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