



Press Release

Barrow County Emergency Services

Alan Shuman, Chief

**Contact: Captain Scott Dakin
Public Information Officer
sdakin@barrowga.org**

Date: January 28, 2019

DPH Commissioner Throws Out Region Council Ruling

For over forty years, Barrow County Emergency Services (BCES) has provided excellent ambulance services to all the citizens of Barrow County. Currently this service is provided by six advanced life support ambulances strategically placed throughout the county, to ensure the best response time to all citizens of Barrow County. On January 22, 2019, Dr. Patrick O'Neal, Director of Public Health made a ruling that may bring the service to an end for all of Barrow County.

The City of Winder put in a request with the Department of Public Health to obtain a license to operate ambulances. In October 2017, they then placed another request with the Department of Public Health to take over ambulance services from Barrow County, within the city limits of Winder. They stated that with a private ambulance service, the citizens of Winder would receive a more timely response. They proposed using an area private ambulance service that was offering an agreement that included an average response time of up to nine minutes and fifty nine seconds for ninety percent of the calls.

Barrow County Emergency Services, who provides the EMS service to all citizens, has placed the six ambulances around the county, to have the best coverage for all Barrow County citizens. This includes four of the ambulances that are assigned coverage areas inside of the City of Winder. With the placement of the ambulances, it has led to an overall average response time of seven minutes and twenty-one seconds to all calls for emergency medical services.

One of the areas BCES excels at, is the treatment of heart attacks. "When It comes to the treatment of heart attack patients, time is of the essence and with each passing minute the odds of survival go down." stated Jason Grady the North East Georgia Regional STEMI Summit Coordinator. "When a heart attack patient calls 911 in Barrow County BCES assesses, diagnosis, treats and transports the patient in a timely manner. In fact from the time a BCES unit is on scene until the time of definitive treatment at a Northeast Georgia Medical Center hospital is, on average, 90 minutes." This greatly improves the chance of survival.

To further enhance the EMS service, BCES has also licensed all county fire trucks as medical first response vehicles and ensures that every fire truck has medically trained personnel assigned to them. They will respond to critical medical emergencies, along with the ambulances, throughout Barrow with the exception of calls in the city limits of Winder.

Following the official code of the State of Georgia, the Northeast Georgia Region 10 Emergency Medical Services Council started procedures to look at the City of Winder's request and the current services

provided by Barrow County. The Northeast Georgia Region 10 EMS council is comprised of emergency medical professionals within the ten county region that includes Barrow County. This includes private and public organizations. The Northeast Georgia Region 10 EMS Council Members has incredible knowledge and experience not only in the field of emergency medical services, but also about the conditions and needs in our county and the region.

From September to November, the Northeast Georgia Region 10 EMS Council hosted four different hearings to discuss, opening the EMS zone to other providers. Testimony was heard from both the city and county as well as hundreds of pages of data was provided. After deliberating for several months, reviewing all testimony and data, the Northeast Georgia Region Ten Council held a vote on November 13, on the request from the City of Winder. In a vote of eighteen to two, the Northeast Georgia Region 10 EMS Council made the decision that the best option was to continue allowing Barrow County to provide the high quality of care they have already been offering.

On December 20, 2018 Dr. Patrick O'Neal hosted his own hearing along with Deputy Director David Newton, Georgia Office of EMS and Trauma at Georgia Department of Public Health. The hearing was to look at the ruling made by the Northeast Georgia Region 10 Emergency Medical Services Council. Representatives with Barrow County and City of Winder were in attendance at this hearing that was held at the Department of Public Health office in Atlanta.

On January 22, 2019 Dr. O'Neal sent his ruling to all entities involved. In his ruling he stated that he has rejected the decision of the Northeast Georgia Region 10 EMS Council. He also states that he was directing the Northeast Georgia Region 10 EMS Council to open all of Barrow County EMS zone, and accept proposals from Barrow County, City of Winder and any other ambulance provider that may wish to submit a proposal for EMS coverage of all Barrow County citizens.

According to the ruling, the Northeast Georgia Region 10 EMS Council must accept proposals from all interested licensed ambulance providers. The Council shall then make a written recommendation on who shall provide EMS coverage to the citizens of Barrow County by March 19, 2019. According to the ruling Barrow County must then accept the ruling of Dr. O'Neal and accept services from whichever ambulance services proposal is accepted by the Northeast Georgia Region 10 EMS Council or Dr. O'Neal.

In ruling Dr. O'Neal writes "although the statute does not specify the standard to be applied in considering a request to open an EMS zone, the Regional EMS Council recommendation must nonetheless be consistent with the three statutory criteria: economy, efficiency, and benefit to the public welfare. Therefore, the question before me is simply whether, given the circumstances, there exists an opportunity to improve the economy, efficiency or benefit to the public welfare in the Barrow County EMS zone. Based on the information provided at the hearing, including the record of the Council, I conclude the answer to that question is yes"

In his ruling he also states that there has been an increase in calls within the City of Winder each year, but does not address that the city has extended its city limits through annexation. It also does not look at the traffic issues when trying to go through downtown Winder. When you take this into consideration, as well as the population growth through all of Barrow County, you realize it will affect any response by any public safety agency.

"We are disheartened by the ruling that has one man overruling the 20 person council," stated Chief Alan Shuman. "We have an incredible department with incredible personnel, who work hard to provide the best EMS care to all of our citizens, no matter where in Barrow County they are located. This ruling makes it so that we are not sure what level of care will be provided in the future of Barrow County. We always look for opportunities to improve the services offered by our department."

Barrow County Chairman Pat Graham also has concerns on the ruling of Dr. O'Neal. "This appears to be a very subjective ruling and has no standards or benchmarks to determine who provides the ambulance service in Barrow County, To say opportunities exist, but make no mention of what standard will be used to meet the perceived opportunities is a hard ruling to understand, " stated Chairman Graham. "It also takes away the authority of Barrow County's duly elected officials to determine the level of care and response being offered in Barrow. That means that Barrow County citizens no longer have any say in the ambulance service they will receive. One individual now has that control over the citizens and that is not the way this country operates."

###