

Butler Eagle

BC3 education rolls with changes in EMS

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By Dave Means,

While it certainly hasn't gotten the same attention as national health care reform, the emergency medical services field in Pennsylvania is undergoing its own significant transition.

However, educators are optimistic the shift will produce even more effective paramedics, emergency medical technicians and first responders.

Kiley Cribbs, coordinator of EMS and police training programs at Butler County Community College, said the state at the beginning of the year rewrote EMS education standards.

“It created a ripple throughout the entire commonwealth because training institutes that used to teach all the disciplines, from first responders to EMTs to paramedics, can no longer do that without meeting these new standards,” she said.

This caused some small care providers to phase out their in-house training, which placed more responsibility on educators.

At BC3, Cribbs and Tom Buttyan, an EMS and continuing education specialist, work to keep the school at the forefront of training for these positions.

BC3 meets EMS workforce needs through both associate degree and certificate programs. The school also offers CPR, first aid and AED (automated external defibrillator) training to businesses, which helps them lower their liability and workers' compensation insurance rates.

Cribbs said the educational transition began in January when the state decided to adopt national standards for EMTs and first responders. Paramedics had already been tested at the national level, she said.

From now on, all positions will be able to practice in any state.

Paramedics are accredited through the Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs, and other first responders are now accredited through the Committee on Accreditation for EMS Professionals.

“Getting the education system solid and in place is the very beginning step in making it more of a professional-level license instead of just a certification,” Cribbs said. Buttyan, who also is a paramedic for Butler Ambulance Service, added, “It's a national curriculum. Then you have Pennsylvania and what the employer requires.”

Cribbs and Buttyan said the new accreditation process has faced a few challenges and will likely take several years to fully implement.

One of those challenges stems from the overall increased skill level required.

While the additional education requirements take more time and money to complete, wages have not increased. Plus, careers with similar training offer better compensation.

Paramedic students at BC3 spend the same amount of time in school and take similar classes as two-year nursing students who graduate with a much higher earning potential.

They said this could result in decreased enrollment and an eventual shortage of EMS professionals.

Documentation is another facet of EMS training that has become more important as funding becomes scarce. Buttyan said paramedic students take a number of writing classes to help them properly document care, which in turn ensures proper reimbursement from insurers.

“If you don't dot your I's and cross your T's, you're not getting paid,” he said.

“We're one of the few occupations that has to understand billing to do our job.”

And they said those rules are always changing.

Cribbs said the newest version of Title 28, the state health and safety code, was released in October.

Referred to as the “paramedic Bible” in the industry, Title 28 outlines all the guidelines and requirements. It is updated regularly based on research and quality assurance.

Cribbs and Buttyan said other changes in health care delivery also could trickle down to the EMS field.

A position that might be created soon is the community paramedic who would visit patients in their homes and teach them how to better manage their health conditions.

“It really is a very interesting time with prehospital and in the world of EMS because everything is new, everything is changing,” Cribbs said.