



June 30, 2019

## **Summary of the formation of the North Fork Ambulance Health Service District – 2019**

Since 1969 the North Fork Ambulance has been challenged with providing reliable ambulance service and quality care with the fastest response time possible to the residents and visitors of the North Fork valley. Over the past 50 years, growing from just 60 calls per year to over 800 calls per year, this service has been funded through membership fees, grants, donations and ambulance transport fees. Up until January of 2019 this vital service had never received public funding. We are happy to report a Special District has been formed by the voters and public funding is allowing this service to continue. The North Fork Ambulance Health Service District is now providing service as North Fork EMS in the valley.

North Fork EMS responds to a 1,550 square mile area and maintains operations out of three stations in the region. This large, rural service area includes the towns of Paonia, Hotchkiss, Crawford, Lazear and Somerset, and also portions of unincorporated areas in Delta, Montrose, and Gunnison Counties. The western service boundary begins at Payne Siding Rd on Hwy 92 between Hotchkiss and Delta and extends through Hotchkiss, Paonia, and Somerset and ends at the Pitkin County line at the top of McClure Pass on Hwy 133. The service area includes Kebler Pass to Horse Ranch Park in the West Elk Wilderness. Traveling north to south, it stretches from the Mesa County line on the Grand Mesa, south through the Stevens Gulch, Paonia area, through Crawford on Hwy 92 to Mile Marker 54 on Black Mesa at the Gunnison County line, and includes the North Rim of the Black Canyon National Park and parts of the Gunnison Gorge Conservation area.

The process of becoming a Special District evolved over several years and began with the North Fork Ambulance Board exploring its options to continue to provide reliable emergency medical services to the North Fork valley. The community identified the following priorities through five public meetings that were held around the valley in 2015:

1. Maintain the fastest response time possible to every emergency.
2. Raise the level of care provided.
3. Become financially sustainable.

To address these priorities, the following actions were taken:

First, to maintain the fastest response time possible it was, and still is, vital to keep adequate, trained staff available to operate ambulances from all three stations. Up until 2009 the EMTs and Drivers were truly volunteers who gave freely of their time to be On-Call in their community, responding from home, work or play at a moment's notice. Today, in order to

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attract and retain crew members who are committed, competent and confident in serving their community's emergency medical needs, North Fork Ambulance offers the essential leadership, training, education and tools, as well as provides a financial reward to crew members. On-Call pay was established with success in the desired effect of attracting and maintaining adequate staff. On-Call pay is a cost effective system to keep schedules filled and ambulances responding from three stations in a rural service with a relatively low call volume.

Secondly, raising the level of care has been met with enthusiasm by crew members who were willing to go back to school to raise their level of certification. Simultaneously, several grants were received to purchase three Quick Response Vehicles for the specific purpose of getting the Advance Life Support crew to the scene of emergencies quickly and safely. This service now has an On-Call ALS provider responding, and additional ALS as available, to render a higher level of care immediately if needed.

The third priority, financial sustainability, proved to be a little more complicated and took several years to accomplish. Through financial analysis, it became clear that the best solution to sustain quality ambulance service now and into the future was through the formation of a Special District. The Board voted in June of 2017 to take the steps to go to the voters to form a Special District and fund it through a mill levy. The financial projections were helpful in setting the mill levy and the Service Plan was written in the spring of 2018. Public hearings were held in all three counties, and the Board of County Commissioners of Delta, Montrose and Gunnison Counties with all three approving the Service Plan in the summer of 2018. Further steps were taken in order for the issues to appear on the November 2018 election ballot. The question to form a Special District to provide ambulance service was approved by over 82% of the voters and the question of funding the District with a mill levy on property taxes was approved by over 72% of the voters.

The North Fork valley community now has a sustainable source to provide the core financial support to maintain quality ambulance service in three communities, upgrade and replace aging equipment and ambulances, and retain and attract On-Call staff members, and provide them with quality EMS training.

On July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019, the North Fork Ambulance Association will cease ambulance operations. This 50-year old nonprofit will become a support organization with a mission to enhance the quality of life in the North Fork valley by supporting emergency medical services along with the health and safety needs of the community.

North Fork EMS will begin providing services on July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019 and will continue to bring the best emergency care possible to the residents and visitors of this rural valley.

Kathy Steckel, District Manager  
North Fork EMS

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