How Lancaster County EMS Built a Culture of Employee Engagement

When Clayton Catoe became director of Lancaster County EMS a decade ago, morale at the South Carolina agency was suffering. The staff was demoralized by a drug diversion scandal that led to the arrest of a long-time paramedic and a lengthy investigation. The agency had been through three directors in as many years.



Members of the Bike Team ready to respond.



At the time, Catoe was working full time as a human resources manager for the state's Department of Corrections, and part time as an advanced EMT for the ambulance service on weekends and holidays. "I enjoyed dealing with the patients. It was a stress relief from HR," he said.

Initially, he wasn't sure he wanted to take the helm at the agency. Yet under his leadership, Lancaster County EMS has built a strong culture of employee engagement, and the department is thriving. Today, the agency operates nine ALS trucks, has 116 full and part-time employees, and answers nearly 20,000 calls annually.



Catoe was chosen as the state's EMS Director of the Year in 2018 and 2020. His employees are also receiving accolades – three paramedics, one advanced EMT and two EMTs all received their state's top honors. Lancaster County EMS also won an achievement award in 2021 from the National Association of Counties for their EMS Boot Camp.

"We don't like to hear the phrase, 'We've always done it that way.' We like to change things up," Catoe said.

A culture of employee engagement

Catoe knew that restoring morale couldn't be a top-down exercise. The staff needed to feel invested in the success of the agency, which meant creating a culture of employee engagement.

"We are about serving the public. I try to let the employees help drive the way we serve the public," Catoe said. "We need more ideas than what I have. We have found that by allowing people to participate or voice their opinions, they have buy-in, and the more likely they are to work harder toward the goal."

To generate ideas and drive change, they formed an array of staff-run committees.

There's an Ambulance Committee, which makes recommendations on emergency vehicle safety improvements and equipment. There's a Standing Orders Committee, which works with the medical director on medical protocols, and an Employee Shift Representative Committee. Its members meet with Catoe quarterly to discuss challenges and make suggestions.

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"People can bring complaints, but they can also bring positivity. One time a shift rep requested to hold a fish fry on a Saturday at headquarters. Another idea was a corn hole tournament against the other public safely departments," Catoe said.

The Jetsonian Committee (named after the TV show, "The Jetsons"), explores new medicine, technology and tools that EMS should know about, while the PR Committee takes the lead on community outreach, such as attending school events and job fairs.

The Competition Committee has the most fun job, Catoe said. They're the ones who compete in first responder competitions, barbeque cooking competitions and put on an annual variety show which raises over $5,000 for local veterans' groups.

"We wanted people to have a voice in the way the service was being run. Whether that was standing orders, the equipment we put on the truck, the schedules we run, the uniforms we wear, or the fun things we do," Catoe said.

Pride and professionalism

Lancaster County EMS personnel also have opportunities to try different roles at the agency. Practitioners can work at festivals and other special events as part of the Bike Team, or they can join the Special Tactical Advance Response (STAR) Team, which responds in mobile trailers to treat injuries at the scene of search and rescues, fires and other incidents.

About 16 practitioners have trained to become SWAT medics who respond with law enforcement on situations such as high-risk search warrants and hostage situations. Others have trained to work with the fire department on high-angle and low-angle rescues.

Others serve with the agency's Honor Guard. Its members attend funerals throughout the state, at the request of families who wish to have their loved one recognized as an EMS professional. The Honor Guard also attends the state's annual EMS memorial service.

"It is very important for us. We do it because we want to show the professionalism. You always will see a fire or a police honor guard, but you don't often see true EMS honor guards. We are professionals too and we want to represent our profession," Catoe said. "We feel whoever we are honoring deserves dignity and respect for the sacrifice they made."



Pay raises

Fish fries and committees build engagement, but Catoe knows employees still care a lot about their paychecks. Paramedics start at $20.41 an hour. Working a typical 24-hour on/48-hour off schedule, a substantial portion of a paramedics hours are billed at overtime rates. So, a starting paramedic can expect to make between $70,000 and $90,000 a year, he said. EMTs make between $40,000 and $50,000, while advanced EMTs earn $55,000 to $60,000.



Clayton Catoe manning the grill.

Training is also paid at overtime rates, and "we require them to do a lot of additional training beyond what is require to keep their National Registry," he said.

This year, Catoe persuaded the County Council to approve a 10% raise for all employees. "I justified why I thought they needed it, and the entire service got it," he said.

Recruiting

To address the workforce shortage issue, the agency launched an EMT Boot Camp. Recruits are paid $10 an hour while they take a 12-week EMT course. Trainees attend class three days a week, and on the other two days, ride-along as a third person on the ambulance.

"We hope to create loyalty to our service, so that when they finish and take their national registry exam, they want to work here," Catoe said.

Of 15 graduates so far, 14 work for Lancaster County EMS, including 10 full-time and four part-time. A new class will start in January.

"It has created a new pipeline for employment," Catoe said. "I have filled 10 vacancies that I didn't have to go out and recruit. I knew their work ethic, how they worked, their patient care, how they came to work on time, everything about them, so we could be confident in hiring them."

Welcome New Agency Members

NAEMT warmly welcomes our newest agency members:

- City of Osage Beach Ambulance, Osage, MO
- CPR Training Professionals, South Windsor, CT
- Lexington County EMS, Lexington, SC
- Marlboro County EMS, Bennettsville, SC
- UVU EMS (Utah Valley University), Provo, UT
- West Columbia Fire Department, West Columbia, SC