PUBLIC SERVICE RESPONSE PRACTICES

Public service responses are frequent in Emergency Medical Services (EMS) systems and present the risk of medical negligence if they are not handled appropriately. An example of a public service response is a 911 call from someone who is unable to get up after a fall. Further complicating matters, a significant number of these responses involve elderly or disabled individuals who may not be able to determine whether they are truly injured.

WHY CAN THIS TYPE OF RESPONSE BE MISLEADING?

- Persons requesting assistance do not generally refer to themselves
- Information conveyed to responders from dispatch may include misleading details, leading responders to an inaccurate expectation prior to their arrival
- Repetitive calls from the same location can lead to assumptive conditions by responders
- The person may downplay the severity of the incident because they do not want the use of lights or sirens in their neighborhood
- The caller may be worried about whether they have adequate insurance or concerned about a bill for service

To assist EMS organizations, VFIS recommends considering the following best practices to help reduce the risk of medical liability during a public service response:

Be aware of specific state or regional protocols for handling public service or lift assistance responses. These protocols vary from state-to-state. It is important that emergency service organizations adhere to the protocols under which they operate.

FIELD RESPONDERS

- Just because an EMS crew was dispatched to the scene for public service does not relieve them of a duty to act. Continue to be an advocate for the patient regardless of the type of call
- Offer to examine and transport the person for further evaluation
- Encourage the patient to seek further medical evaluation

- Suggest alternative treatments or transporting methods
- Involve family members in the discussion
- Seek guidance from medical control

DOCUMENT, DOCUMENT, AND DOCUMENT!

Non-transport responses are a lead cause of litigation against EMS services. It is critical to document activities to help avoid legal action.

- Document public service calls the same way as all other emergency responses
- Complete a thorough Patient Care Report including:
  - Appropriate use of Medical Miranda Rights
  - Patient demographics
  - Details on why the person requested EMS assistance
  - A list of medical symptoms or illness that may have contributed to the event
  - Information on resulting injuries or illness as a result of the event

- A comprehensive medical evaluation with at least two sets of vital signs
- Confirmation of the proper Refusal Against Medical Advice (RMA) on public assist incidents in the absence of specifically-designed regional or state protocols

ADMINISTRATIVE CONTROLS

- Provide written guidelines for handling a Public Service Response
- Conduct regular training on refusal against medical advice protocols including case studies
- Utilize continuous quality improvement programs:
  - Evaluate protocol compliance and documentation adequacy for each response
  - Develop educational materials to be given to persons who are not transported
  - Ensure decisions are medically directed and not financially motivated

SUMMARY

Public service responses are frequent in Emergency Medical Services (EMS) systems and present the risk of medical negligence. Having written guidelines and providing education for staff can lower this exposure risk.

REFERENCES

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2. EMS Lift Assists: Turning Routine Calls into Opportunities for Better Care, Scott McConnell, August 20, 2025

3. Lift Assists and Their Connection to Mortality, EMS World, Michael Kaduce, Sept 2025

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