

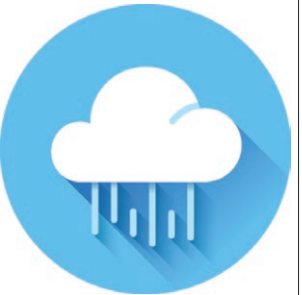


CCP show a delight • The Scene

Wednesday
February 5, 2020
Volume 134 • Issue 16

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Steve Norris'
Forecast



Rain today with a chance of thunderstorms. High near 63 and low around 55. Tomorrow, expect more rain with cooler temperatures on the way.

Obituaries
George A. Vine

Upcoming meetings

The Cumberland County Health Council will meet at noon Wednesday, Feb. 5, at the Cumberland County Health Department, 1503 S. Main St.

The Crossville-Cumberland County Sports and Events Council will meet Thursday, Feb. 6, at 4 p.m. at Crossville City Hall, 392 N. Main St.

The policy committee of the Cumberland County Board of Education will meet Thursday, Feb. 6, at 4:30 p.m. at Central Services, 368 Fourth St.

The Cumberland County Ethics Committee will meet on Friday, Feb. 7, at 12 p.m. in the conference room on the second floor of the Cumberland County Courthouse.

The Crossville Tree Board will meet Feb. 10 at 3 p.m. at Crossville City Hall, 392 N. Main St.

The Crossville City Council will meet Tuesday, Feb. 11, for its monthly meeting, beginning at 6 p.m. The council will also convene as the audit committee at 5:15 p.m., hold a public hearing on a Community Development Block Grant at 5:45 p.m. followed by the beer board and solicitation board prior to the 6 p.m. meeting.

The building and grounds committee of the Cumberland County Board of Education will meet at 4:30 p.m. Feb. 11 at Central Services, 368 Fourth St.

THP to hold sobriety checks

The Tennessee Highway Patrol will conduct a sobriety roadside safety checkpoint on Hwy. 70 at Brown-town Rd. Thursday, Feb. 13, beginning at 9 p.m.

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Vehicular assault case nets two years \$14,215 in restitution

A Roane County man charged in an August 2016 traffic crash that left two persons with serious injuries pleaded guilty in Cumberland County Criminal Court and received a two-year prison sentence.

Zachary Neil Byrd, 26, Harri-man, entered his plea before Criminal Court Judge Wesley Bray and with at least one of the victims agreeing with the settlement. The second victim was described by Assistant District Attorney Amanda Worley as being uncooperative with prosecutors.

The indictment states that Byrd was driver of a vehicle that crashed into another vehicle driven by Timothy Elkins, leaving the motorist and a passenger, identified only by last name of Mullins in court.

Byrd was indicted in August 2017 but was not located until last year. Five Tennessee Highway Patrol troopers were identified as witnesses in the indictment.

See CASE • 3A

The Final Four



Michael Lindsay/Chronicle

The Cumberland County elementary basketball championship games are set; South Cumberland and Pleasant Hill will compete in the girls game, while Homestead and North Cumberland will face off in the boys championship game. Both will be played Thursday at Cumberland County High School with the girls beginning at 6 p.m. Pictured above, clockwise, are South's Sofi Miller, Pleasant Hill's Aleaha Moore, Homestead's Bryce Elmore and North's Cade Capps. See page 4A for coverage from Monday's semifinal round.



Heather Mullinix/Chronicle

Paramedic Chris Miller pulls up information on a call using new tablets equipped with Active 9-1-1. The app allows ambulance personnel to map the location of emergency calls with information directly from emergency dispatchers. The pilot program was well received and the department was looking at equipping all ambulances with the new equipment.

County works to improve EMS response times

When someone calls 9-1-1, seconds can feel like hours.

Dispatchers must get important information from the caller and determine which of the 10 agencies it serves is needed at the scene.

Then, responders must travel from their current location to the patient.

According to Cumberland County Mayor Allen Foster, Emergency Medical Services response times averaged 9 minutes and 11 seconds in 2019 — and improvement from 2018's average response of 9 minutes 26 seconds. An ambulance was on scene in 10 minutes or less 63% of the

The Heartbeat of



EMS

Part TWO of THREE | By Heather Mullinix

time, up from 61% in 2018.

"Some of the things we've done to improve those times haven't had a full year yet," Foster said. "We're trending the right direction — and we're not done working on this thing."

In the urban areas — Crossville, Fairfield Glade and Tansi — the response time for emergency calls averaged 8 minutes 25 seconds in 2019, down slightly

See EMS • 2A

13 charged with meth over past two weeks

Crossville Police and Cumberland County sheriff's deputies have made 13 arrests relating to possession of methamphetamine as the amount of meth use continues to rise across the area.

The flurry of drug activity in the community highlights findings from a recent Tennessee Bureau of Investigation report that detailed the number of instances involving meth spiked last year.

The following is a synopsis of arrests by local jurisdictions for methamphetamine since Jan. 17.

•MacKenzie Faith Cornell, 19, 69 Locust Grove

Dr., Apt. 106, Jan. 17, felony possession of methamphetamine and possession of drug paraphernalia. The arrest stems from an investigation by K9 Deputy Ryan Ashburn, Cpl. Dustin Hensley and Deputy Ben Griffin investigating a complaint about drug trafficking.

Deputies seized a digital scale, clear plastic bags with residue, glass pipe with residue and a small package of meth. Also seized was a cellphone that contained evidence relating to the investigation. Co-defendants are Sherrill and Fox.

See METH • 6A

Songwriters converge at Grinder House

By GARY NELSON
Chronicle senior staff writer

Music is popular in Tennessee and is a tourist attraction that continues to grow even in rural communities.

Asa Reese, who owns Grinder House Coffee Shop with Angela Chas-

tain, said, "The talent in Crossville and the areas around here is incredible."

Grinder House Coffee is an official "Qualifying Round" site for the second annual Made in Tennessee Songwriter Week.

Music professionals See SONGWRITERS • 3A



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EMS: Residents say performance standards needed

• From 1A

from 8 minutes 29 seconds the year before.

“We want to have the best service we can possibly have in Cumberland County,”

Foster said, adding he meets frequently with EMS Director Chris Miller.

The county measures EMS response time from the time dispatch relays the call to emergency medical personnel. That’s the definition provided by the County Technical Assistance Service, which conducted a study of Cumberland County’s ambulance service last fall, Foster said.

Cumberland County’s dispatch times average 51 seconds, according to Eric Ritzman, director of the Cumberland County E-911 communications center.

Some residents, however, believe the clock starts when someone picks up the phone. “I had a heart attack.

When we called the ambulance, I really didn’t care what process they went through, I wanted to know how quick they were going to get there,” said Tom Reigle.

Currently, there are no state or federal laws regarding EMS response times. A national study of EMS response times published by the Journal of American Medical Association in October 2017 found an average response time of 7 minutes from call to on scene with the time increasing to 14 minutes in rural areas.

John Byers of Fairfield Glade points to information from the American Heart Association that calls for 8 minute response 90% of the time for advanced life support. He and Reigle are among a group of residents who are advocating for ambulance service performance standards.

Despite some changes in the department, Reigle and Byers say response times are not headed the right direction. They point to October data that found response times exceeded 10 minutes for 69% of the calls, with a median “call to on-scene” time of 11 minutes 33 seconds in town up to 16 minutes and 39 seconds in Crab Orchard.

They plan to review data quarterly in the coming year to study trends.

Both Reigle and Byers say the county needs to establish performance standards for EMS services and provide the resources necessary to meet those standards. Reigle said, “About one in every five county residents, and virtually 100% of every nursing home resident, will be in an ambulance this next year.”

Byers added, “There was one day they had nine calls in one hour in Fairfield Glade.”

He said the increasing age of county residents would continue to increase the need for ambulance services.

CTAS findings

Last year, Foster asked CTAS to evaluate the county’s EMS operation and make recommendations for improvement.

The study used 2018 data, with 11,244 calls included. Of those, EMS was on scene within 10 minutes from dispatch 59% of the time, and EMS personnel were on scene within five minutes 26% of the time. When considering the most serious calls, priority 1 and 2, EMS was on scene within 10 minutes for 65.2% of the calls.

Cumberland County treats all calls through the 9-1-1 system as emergency calls while some ambulance services use a priority dispatch system where the caller and dispatcher can set a priority depending on the nature of the call.

“I’ve had calls where they say it’s a fall, but they think the patient is OK, and when I get there, the patient is in cardiac arrest,” Miller said. “Every call we run, we consider the possibility of a missed diagnosis.”

EMS nearing ‘break even’ operation

By **HEATHER MULLINIX**

Chronicle editor

While a private ambulance company has bowed out of discussions with a citizens group, some residents believe the county has missed an opportunity to provide better service at less cost.

“The relationship ... has to be a mutually acceptable agreement,” said John Byers, adding he commended the company for their position.

But the company had offered to take over the county’s ambulance service at no cost to the county. They offered to hire county employees, possibly at higher wages than offered by the county. And, they offered to pay the county the value of the equipment and assets for the department.

“This county could have another \$1.2 million in the bank to spend,” said Tom Reigle.

Cumberland County Mayor Allen Foster said the ambulance service is operating at almost a break-even point from an operational standpoint; however, and the county is working on opportunities to increase revenue.

“Last year, we spent a little over \$4 million and we collected a little over \$4 million,” he said. “If we’re not operationally break-even, we’re right at it.”

The county has been funding capital purchases above the operational costs, such as new ambulances and more equipment.

Foster noted the Cumberland County Commission budgets very conservatively.

“We make sure that we’re not going to over run our expenses, and we make sure we don’t overestimate our revenue. If you do either of those things, you’ve got problems at the end of the year,” he said.

In December, the commission approved a resolution asking the state to increase funding for ambulance ser-

vices provided to TennCare patients. Currently, TennCare pays about half the rate Medicare pays for ambulance services. EMS Director Chris Miller has been working with a coalition of ambulance directors to craft a resolution to present to the Tennessee General Assembly in January.

“That would be between \$175,000 to \$200,000 a year for our county. That’s a truck [ambulance],” Foster said. “We’ve improved the financial aspect of our service. We’re working on the response times.

“We’re not done.”

The county commission will begin working on its 2020-21 budget in the next few months. Foster said he and Miller are still evaluating 2019 EMS data and will make budget recommendations based on the data.

Bad Debt

Cumberland County hired a third-party billing company in 2014 to help process payments for services. That’s helped the county collect more revenue.

“We’re staying mostly caught up on the billing,” Foster said. “That’s been an important aspect of doing better financially.”

The county also removed more than \$14 million in uncollected revenue in 2014 from the books. That followed a recommendation from the Tennessee Comptroller, Foster said.

“You have debt accumulate on the books that should be written off,” he said.

Much of the balance included the amount billed left unpaid after insurance payments were applied. Medicare and TennCare provide reimbursement and then bar the county from seeking the difference in charges and payment from the patient.

“It’s called ‘accept assignment,’” Foster said. “You are not allowed to

charge the patient for that.”

The county removed \$8.9 million in insurance balances that were more than a year old deemed uncollectible, \$4.3 million in patient balances deemed “bad debt,” and \$650,000 of legacy balance less than one year old but that had an estimated 10% return on the balance.

Foster was on the budget committee at the time.

“You look at it and think, ‘Wow, where’d this come from?’” Foster said. “But when you dig into it, you see it’s money we weren’t going to collect.”

Grant Funding

Miller has been successful in bringing grant funds to the county to help pay for new equipment needs.

The county received a grant that covered 90% of the cost of purchasing battery-powered stretchers in 2018. The county covered the remaining \$16,000 for the purchase.

He’s also applied for a grant to purchase a new power loading system.

“That’s going to become mandated,” Miller said.

Another grant provided \$383,494 toward the purchase of 12 cardiac monitors and batteries. Cumberland County Cardiac Pulmonary Rehabilitation Alumni Inc. provided funding from donations, and a Volunteer Energy Cooperative CustomerShare grant purchased video laryngoscopes for all the ambulances.

That was critical equipment for the department, Miller said, noting securing a patient’s airway is one of the most important elements of emergency medical response.

Future needs include a device that mechanizes CPR, allowing the paramedic to monitor the patient and administer medication while ensuring chest compressions and breathing continues.

Growing Need

According to the U.S. Census, 30.7% of Cumberland County residents are above age 65. Byers and Reigle said ambulance use increases with age, particularly among seniors living in assisted living or other care facilities.

Reigle noted the county has one of the lowest property tax rates in the state. The county charges property owners \$1.56530 per \$100 of assessed value. This places Cumberland fifth lowest among the 95 counties in 2019, according to the Tennessee Comptroller’s office.

“There is a tendency to be very frugal,” Reigle said.

Byers said that could impact the county’s ability to recruit retirees.

“We have a population increase. The average age has increased. And we have the same seven ambulances,” Byers said. “I’m reaching a point that this is not the area that is in my best interest to be.”

■ *Heather Mullinix may be reached at hmullinix@crossville-chronicle.com.*

Coming Up:

Friday — *Until help arrives*

In Case You Missed It:

Monday — *EMS staff dedicated to patient well being*

Crossville Chronicle
(USPS No. 138940)

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Published three times a week (Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday) by the Crossville Chronicle at 125 West Ave., Crossville, TN, 38555. Periodical postage paid at Crossville, TN 38555. Publication Number USPS 138940.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Crossville Chronicle, 125 West Ave., Crossville, TN 38555. Telephone number is 931-484-5145. Subscription rate for one year inside Cumberland County is \$72 (\$41 for six months or \$29 for three months); senior citizens rate for one year is \$65 (\$35 for six months or \$23 for three months); out-of-county but in the state rate is \$85 (\$49 for six months); and the out-of-state rate is \$127 (\$70 for six months). Digital only subscriptions are \$65 (\$35 for six months). Mastercard and Visa are accepted.

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may not always be at the EMS station.

“It is a balancing act keeping the entire county in mind,” he said. “This is the case for all of our locations as EMS attempts to provide coverage throughout the day.”

Other efforts to improve EMS response time have included buying GPS systems for the ambulances and providing personnel with pagers that alert them to an emergency call. Before, they were called on the phone.

“Now, when we hear the tone on the pagers, we’re up and walking to the truck,” said Paramedic Chris Kemmer. “Even at night. We’re able to have a one or two-minute response time, which is phenomenal.”

In recent weeks, the county has piloted using tablets equipped with the Active 9-1-1 app, which allows the ambulance personnel to immediately get address information from dispatch and start toward the emergency. The app provides GPS services and can update with voice activation.

Transports

In addition to emergency medical calls, Cumberland County’s ambulance service also transports patients — either from nursing facilities in the community to the hospital or other medical offices or from the hospital to other medical facilities outside the county.

Foster said the number of transports from Cumberland Medical Center out of Cumberland County had been growing in part due to the closure of Jamestown Regional Medical Center last summer, which has increased the number of patients seen at CMC.

“We’re thankful and very blessed for CMC,” he said. “We can transport the patient to provide that first level of care, but there are times patients need care that can’t be provided here, and they have to be transported.”

About a third of ambulance calls require personnel to transport a patient out of town, Byers said, adding it takes about four hours to complete each transport.

Miller said the ambulance department tries to mitigate the impact of those out-of-county transports. For example, they use a rotating schedule to deter-

mine which ambulance is sent outside the county. They will then “pre-stage” an ambulance halfway between town and the area where the transport ambulance was stationed.

Patients must have a medical need for convalescent transport. Medicare requires the patient to be unable to stand without assistance before the trip would be considered covered.

Private Companies

Byers and Reigle have studied ambulance service in surrounding areas and found several communities contract with private companies. Their service contracts include specific standards for emergency response and financial penalties.

“Our feeling has been we should be able to at least provide the level of service other counties provide,” Byers said. “Which we don’t have today.”

The county commission approved a resolution in January 2011 that requires anyone providing medical transport services in the community to meet certain standards, but Byers says it prevents private competition and doesn’t set performance standards for the county’s operation. In May, the emergency services committee of the county commission voted not to privatize the ambulance service.

Foster told the Chronicle private contracts often set different criteria for rural and urban response, and can allow extensions of time if a first responder arrives on the scene. He said the guarantees also sometimes only apply to “priority 1” calls but Cumberland County doesn’t prioritize emergency calls.

However, private companies sometimes have resources the county does not, like technology that analyzes historic emergency call data.

Byers and Reigle said a private company they talked with doesn’t have stationary substations. Instead, the company moves ambulances around the community throughout the day to provide the fastest response in areas where historical data says calls are most likely to originate.