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## Lafayette ambulance service unaffected by state bid-rigging allegations

By Nick Marnell



ConFire ambulance parked in the Kaiser Walnut Creek emergency room bay on May 7, 2018.  
Photo Nick Marnell

Lafayette residents will notice no change in their emergency medical service as a result of allegations of anti-competitive practices made against Contra Costa County EMS by a state agency, according to Contra Costa County officials.

Ambulance transport service for most of Contra Costa County was provided by American Medical Response through 2015. When the county EMS agency opened up bidding on a new deal, the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District teamed up with subcontractor AMR in order to leverage their combined experience and resources to secure the contract. The district and three private ambulance companies attended a bidders conference in March 2015, and only the ConFire-AMR Alliance submitted a proposal to provide ambulance service. The county Board of Supervisors, which doubles as the fire district board of directors, awarded an exclusive five-year contract to the Alliance in November 2015.

Ross Elliott, executive director of the California Ambulance Association, said that a small private ambulance company that wanted to bid complained about the county request for proposal process. "If you read between the lines, the county said that AMR was their partner at the bidders conference. The deck was stacked," Elliott said. "If a small company already knew the outcome, why would they spend up to \$40,000 to respond to an RFP? It put a chilling effect on competition." Elliott would not identify the ambulance company that fingered the Alliance.

The complaint reached the California Emergency Medical Services Authority, and in April the authority alleged that the RFP process conducted by the county EMS agency, in collusion with ConFire and AMR, stifled competition due to bid rigging. The state agency withdrew its approval of the 2015 RFP for the county EMS plan and declared the Alliance operational areas nonexclusive, effective immediately.

Contra Costa County appealed the decision, saying the EMSA had no authority to rescind its approval of the RFP and that the state agency abused its discretion and exceed its jurisdiction by designating county operating areas as nonexclusive. The county also called the allegations made by the California Ambulance Association unfounded. "In Contra Costa County, all contracts relevant to the provision of ambulance services in the County were approved at noticed public meetings, and all steps in the ambulance procurement process occurred openly and transparently, at public meetings," Sharon Anderson, county counsel, wrote in an April 26 letter to the EMSA.

Despite the state agency decision to curtail exclusive Alliance ambulance rights, competitors have not flocked into Lafayette to respond to emergency medical calls. "This action has no impact on the high-performing EMS system we've been providing for almost 30 months," ConFire Chief Jeff Carman said. "When Lafayette residents dial 911, they will see the same ambulances provided by ConFire and there will be no changes to the system."

Nor will the state action have any impact on Moraga or Orinda ambulance service, which is provided by the Moraga-Orinda Fire District.

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