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(360) 629-2184
Fax: (360) 652-3166
8117 267th St. NW
Stanwood, WA 98292
www.NorthCountyFireEms.com

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Contacts: Chief John Cermak
Office (360) 629-2184 Cell (425) 789-8036 jcermak@northcountyfireems.com

Captain Gary Lingel
(425) 508-1013 glingel@northcountyfireems.com

North County Fire/EMS: A Day in the Life of a Firefighter/Paramedic

(Stanwood, Wash.) – North County Fire/EMS (also known as North County Regional Fire Authority) is asking voters to renew a levy for Emergency Medical Service (EMS) on the November election ballot. In 2014, almost 75 percent of all calls were for medical emergencies, and that number is increasing.



[Photo 1 (L-R): Capt. Gary Lingel with daughter, Peyton and wife, Dena]

Captain Gary Lingel, 33, serves as a Firefighter/Paramedic and Medical Services Officer for North County Fire/EMS. He was born and raised in Stanwood, Wash., and continues to live there with his wife Dena and their 8-month old daughter Peyton on their family farm.

Captain Lingel, or “Gary” as he insists on being called, started as a volunteer with the fire authority in 2000 before being hired full-time in 2005 after putting himself through school to earn his paramedic certification. In 2009, he became the Medical Services Officer for the fire authority as well, which means he oversees the EMS program.

Lingel is assigned to the Bryant Fire Station and serves as a shift captain. A shift is 48 hours long, starting at 7:00 a.m. Firefighter/Paramedics live at the station during their shifts to be able to respond to emergency calls faster.

Lingel is quick to emphasize that there is no “typical” work day for his profession. Firefighters have a full work load while on shift and completing everything is contingent on the number of emergency calls the station receives.



[Photo 2 (L-R): Lingel with Firefighter/EMT Kevin Stone wash down the engine at the start of the day.]

For example, his crew has to meet with the firefighters coming off shift to debrief on significant emergency calls that happened the night before, and to discuss any maintenance issues with the station, apparatus or equipment. Firefighters also hold a daily safety meeting and must check all the engines and ambulances to make sure they are road worthy and stocked with the necessary medical supplies and equipment. There is regular maintenance and cleaning of the station, two hours of training per day, as well as an hour for physical conditioning to make sure firefighters have the strength and endurance that the job requires. Lingel also has additional responsibilities as the fire authority’s Medical Services Officer.



[Photo 3: Lingel with EKG during the routine daily check of all equipment]

Any of these activities could be interrupted by an emergency call. During one recent shift, Lingel responded to medical emergencies involving an elderly person who had fallen, another with an adverse reaction to new medicine, a person with chest pains, and someone who was unresponsive in a parked car. Firefighters also cleared a large tree and downed power lines from a busy road, and a separate vehicle accident that had sparked a brush fire. These were just calls for firefighters at the Bryant Fire Station and don't necessarily include the other four stations operated by the fire authority.

Lingel says that the most frequent medical call is usually for chest pains, and Snohomish County has this down to a science. Within six minutes of arriving on scene, North County Fire/EMS Paramedics have attached an electrocardiogram, or "EKG", to a patient and administered medication. By the 10 minute mark, patients are on their way to the closest hospital cardiology department, which has received the EKG readout and readied an operating room.

The second most common medical emergency is usually for stroke. Snohomish County is working to improve EMS protocols for strokes, similar to what is being done for cardiac patients to bypass long emergency room waits.

Drug overdoses also are becoming more common as heroin usage increases or people become addicted to prescription drugs, primarily painkillers. There is also a fair amount of injury from falls as Baby Boomers age in the area served by North County Fire/EMS.

While these types of emergencies require medical treatment, there are some where people just need a helping hand. For example, firefighters regularly stop to help stranded motorists as they travel throughout the fire authority.

During one bad snow storm, Lingel was dispatched to a medical emergency at a home and found an entire family without heat. After transporting the patient to a local hospital, he called a company to repair the family's wood stove and paid for it out of his own pocket.

On another call, North County Fire/EMS Paramedics responded to a medical emergency for a diabetic whose blood sugar had plummeted. After administering medication, they finished cooking the dinner on the stove to make sure the patient would have something to eat.

Lingel says that what he and other firefighters with North County Fire/EMS do is much more than a job. People work in emergency services because they care about others and can help and provide comfort in difficult situations.

Forty eight hours after he started work, Lingel is preparing to end his shift. Assuming he is not on a call, he wakes at 6:00 a.m. and finishes his patient care reports. He cleans the station, puts on a fresh pot of coffee, and gets ready to debrief the next crew that arrives ready to help all of us at a moment's notice.

The EMS levy funds the most advanced life saving procedures using Firefighter/Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) and Paramedics. If approved by voters, the levy would continue funding at 50 cents per \$1,000 of assessed property value, or \$100 per year or approximately \$8.33 per month for the owner of a \$200,000 home.

North County Fire/EMS provides fire suppression and emergency medical service to 25,000 people over 107 square miles, including the City of Stanwood. More information about the EMS levy can be found on North County Fire/EMS web site at www.northcountyfireems.com or like us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/NCFireEMS.

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