

Ambulance services could dry up with Cuomo budget proposal

David Lombardo February 27, 2019

A proposed cut in Medicaid reimbursement rates has ambulance providers in New York warning that the entire industry could be in jeopardy. (Skip Dickstein / Times Union)

ALBANY - A proposed cut in Medicaid reimbursement rates has ambulance providers in New York warning that the entire industry could be in jeopardy.

The ominous prediction stems from the fact that answering an emergency call for a Medicaid patient in New York is already a money-losing proposition because of the state's reimbursement rate, according to the United New York Ambulance Network.

While the losses are generally offset by patients with private insurance, the industry maintains that the rate reduction proposed by Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo's budget would make it impossible for providers to remain open.

"To cut further, we can't sustain that," said Mohawk Ambulance Service President James P. McPartlon.

Mohawk Ambulance, which operates throughout the Capital Region, already gets its lowest payment for serving Medicaid patients, and the proposed cut would lower the rate by about 22 percent.

As mandated responders, McPartlon said they can't pick and choose who they pick up, which means they can't ignore emergency calls that have the potential to put them out of business.

The situation is particularly problematic for rural counties, which generally have a disproportionately high Medicaid population and patients require longer transportation, according to McPartlon. "Their costs are higher and they get reimbursed less," he said of operators in rural areas.

He said the situation attributed to the recent closure of the Ambulance Services of Fulton County.

It's not clear how bad the change would be for Mohawk Ambulance, as McPartlon said they're currently "assessing the impact."

He said there isn't additional revenue that could offset the cut, but they could potentially be forced to turn down non-emergency calls for Medicaid patients to save money. That outcome would affect the ability of hospitals and nursing homes to turn over space in their facilities and create a backlog of patients.

United New York Ambulance Network Chairman David Butler added that the problem is exacerbated by the state's aging population, which only increases the demand for ambulance services.

"In situations where Medicare pays an appropriate amount, Medicaid need not pay more than it ordinarily would," said state Budget Division spokesman Morris Peters. "These changes, being taken for consistency, are not anticipated to have any adverse impacts on availability of transport services."

A final budget agreement is due on March 31.

David.Lombardo@timesunion.com - 518.454.5427 - @poozer87