

Volunteer first responders answer the call on 9/11



Community EMTs serve in the wake of tragedy

The moment Carol Tyler realized what was happening she knew she needed to act. As a member of the Ho-Ho-Kus Volunteer Ambulance Corps, she'd been trained to help in critical moments.

But nothing could prepare her for the events on September 11, 2001, and the massive effort to evacuate hundreds of thousands of people in the aftermath of the World Trade Center attacks.

Answering the call for help

A small New Jersey community roughly 30 minutes from New York City, Carol describes Ho-Ho-Kus as a “sweet little town where we care about each other.” It’s the kind of place where everyone knows everybody, she added.

Being part of such a close-knit community made it easy to help when people were in trouble. “There are very few jobs where you walk in and change the course of history,” said Carol. “You see people at their very worst and then you see them smile. It’s life changing for them and it’s life changing for us.”

On the day of the attacks, Carol was at work when she saw on television that the Twin Towers had been struck. She immediately rushed to join her team—a crew that included her husband, also an emergency medical technician (EMT).

Connections when you need them most

By the time the call for help came in, they were already on their way to the city in a convoy of emergency vehicles. A state police officer flagged them down and escorted them to Ellis Island instead, where they were the third crew across the bridge.

“Allendale, Maywood, Waldwick, Upper Saddle River, we were all on the highway together,” said Carol. “We pulled up and saw they were doing triage and treatment at the pier. This was closest to where the boats were coming in.”

With the city’s bridges and tunnels closed, evacuees arrived at Ellis Island via the Hudson River on any vessel that would take them. Many were covered in dust and debris. Others were panicked, anxious, and crying. Carol and her crew unloaded trunks filled with first aid supplies and leapt into action. “Our crews went to the boats and had water to clean up their faces. We had them take swallows and rinse to clear their airways, to try to calm them down.”

With boats arriving one after the next, they directed evacuees to waiting buses before helping the next group coming off the pier. “Treat them as much as we can, check them for shock, check them for injuries. They were just getting everyone off the island (of Manhattan) any way they could,” said Carol.

Making a difference

As difficult as the day was, it wasn’t the first time Carol treated people from the World Trade Center. She was also there after the 1993 bombing that destroyed an underground parking garage, resulting in six fatalities and over 1,000 people injured.

In both instances, Carol relied on her training to stay focused. But even now there wasn’t time to process what she was seeing. Communication difficulties added to the confusion, with news traveling by word of mouth. “It was kind of like the Pony Express. Messages just went from one person to another,” said Carol. “We didn’t have radios because EMTs from New Jersey didn’t have the same radio bands as in New York.”



“We were professionals and we did a job. We did what we were trained to do.”

Carol Tyler
Board of Trustees and Member
Ho-Ho-Kus Volunteer Ambulance Corps

Purpose-built for first responders

After heading home for a shower and a few hours of sleep, Carol and her corps mates returned to Jersey City just north of Ellis Island, where they took a boat across the river to Ground Zero. There was so much going on with multiple agencies onsite, including crews that'd worked through the night. It was hard to know who was in charge or what needed to be done. But Carol's team made themselves useful.

They shuttled food and water, cleared an area so people could rest, and cleaned the noses and paws of rescue dogs. "We were just a little piece of the whole thing so we did what we could do. You found the work. You got it done. And every so often someone would say, hey, follow me."

A lasting impact

Reflecting on the experience, Carol remembers how little communication there was during that time. Cell phones weren't as common as they are today. She and her husband couldn't even get a message to her kids back at home. With so many different radio bands spread across agencies in New Jersey and New York, channels were overwhelmed with chatter and coordination was difficult.

Nevertheless, Carol is proud of the way her team pulled together. Just as she is of all the agencies, departments, and volunteers that were there. That selfless mindset and work ethic has made an impression on her two daughters, both of whom now serve in the Ho-Ho-Kus Volunteer Ambulance Corps.

As a corps captain, Julie Tyler takes pride in the legacy her parents have created. And she's seen the effect September 11 has had on her peers. "9/11 has had a huge impact on this generation," she said. "Some people lost family members, so giving back and being that example their family had, whether it was a firefighter that went in knowing they were giving up their life, that means something."



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Priority and preemption for public safety

Communication reform

Although Ho-Ho-Kus is much smaller than New York City, staying in contact with dispatchers and the local police and fire departments is critical for public safety groups of any size. “Communication is literally 90 percent of our job,” Julie said. “If we didn’t have the elements we have today, I don’t think we’d be able to perform in the same capacity as we’re doing.”

Rather than risk a dropped call or gap in coverage, the Ho-Ho-Kus Volunteer Corps now rely on the FirstNet network.

FirstNet was created in response to the communication challenges experienced during 9/11. It gives public safety agencies priority access on a network reserved for first responders. That kind of exclusivity gives Julie peace of mind, knowing the Corps will be there to answer when it counts. “The community supports us so much. Having FirstNet has just made it easier to be able to give back,” said Julie.

As an EMT and a parent, Carol is equally glad to see emergency communication has improved after 9/11. “I hope we don’t have to ever go through anything like that again. I’m a mom. I hate to think of my children being there,” she said. Though she’s certain they’d meet the moment if it did. “Just think about what you would do and do what you think is right. It’ll all work out in the end.”



“My family’s legacy is a pretty cool thing. I don’t think I’ve met anyone that could say their entire family served on the ambulance corps.”

Julie Tyler
Captain
Ho-Ho-Kus Volunteer Ambulance Corps