

# San Juan EMS hits new high

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If you thought that you heard the sound of more sirens this past year, well, you're probably right.

San Juan Island Emergency Medical Services and Island Air Ambulance together responded to a record number of emergency calls and transported a record number of patients in 2011. All told, San Juan EMS and Island Air Ambulance responded to 1,266 emergency calls last year, a 22 percent increase over 2010.

"It's not just a matter of a record number of patients but the quality by which they were transported," said Dr. J. Michael Edwards, commissioner of San Juan Island's hospital district, which oversees local EMS and air ambulances services. "San Juan EMS was recognized as being No. 1 in the nation for patient satisfaction, based on patient surveys conducted independently by EMS survey team in the fourth quarter of 2011, and Island Air Ambulance carries a perfect safety record."

Last year's accomplishments by island EMTs, paramedics, were recognized by members of the hospital district commission at the group's Jan. 24 public meeting. Edwards noted that EMS and Island Air Ambulance are hard at work to integrate their individual operations with the new Peace Island Medical Center, which is slated to open its doors at the end of the year.

"We as a community could ask for no better and are very appreciative of their efforts," he said.

EMS spokeswoman Cady Davies believes the reason behind the latest increase in patient numbers is mostly two-fold. A change in island demographics is partly responsible, she said, as is the capacity of Island Air Ambulance to provide "advanced life support" with two transport nurses onboard its fixed-wing planes.

"There's an increase in people visiting here and an increase in people coming here to live," Davies said. "And there's more people moving here for retirement."

At roughly 23 percent, San Juan has one the highest concentrations of people 65 years or older of Washington's 39 counties, nearly double the state average of 12 percent, according to 2010 U.S. Census.

In 2011, more than 550 patients were transported to mainland hospitals via helicopters operated by Airlift Northwest, Island Air Ambulance, the ferry and the Sheriff's boat Guardian.

Island Air Ambulance, sponsored by the island's hospital district, is a community based fixed-wing ambulance program operated in partnership by San Juan Island-based Island Air and San Juan EMS. It remains one of only a few air ambulance services in the nation that utilizes critical care nurses and EMT flight crews.