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Regional Collaboration and Innovation: The Formation of the CENCAL Fire and EMS Authority

Across California, local governments and special districts are increasingly exploring regional service delivery models to address growing service demands, financial pressures, and evolving community expectations. In San Joaquin County, three fire agencies came together to develop a collaborative solution for emergency medical services that strengthens local oversight while improving ambulance service delivery for residents.

The CENCAL Fire and EMS Authority is a Joint Powers Authority (JPA) formed by the City of Stockton Fire Department, the City of Lodi Fire Department, and the South San Joaquin County Fire Authority (Tracy Fire). The Authority was created to position local public safety agencies to participate in the delivery of emergency ambulance transport services within San Joaquin County.

Recognizing the Opportunity for Regional Collaboration

In anticipation of San Joaquin County's planned competitive procurement process for Exclusive Operating Area (EOA) ambulance services, fire service leaders began discussions in 2022 regarding whether a regional public agency model could effectively participate in the ambulance system. Historically, ambulance transport services in the county had been delivered through private providers under county contracts.

Recognizing the potential benefits of greater coordination between fire and ambulance resources, the participating agencies commissioned a comprehensive feasibility study in 2023. The study evaluated operational, financial, and governance considerations associated with creating a regional ambulance services model led by local public safety agencies.

The study concluded that a collaborative regional approach could improve service coordination, enhance local oversight, and expand ambulance deployment levels throughout the county.

Establishing a Public–Private Partnership

To support operational implementation, the participating agencies initiated a competitive procurement process to identify a private ambulance provider capable of partnering with the new regional authority. Following a formal request for proposals process, American Medical Response (AMR) was selected as the operational partner.

Under this model, the CENCAL Fire and EMS Authority provides system governance and oversight, while AMR provides ambulance operations under contract to the Authority. This public–private partnership allows the regional authority to maintain policy oversight, system planning, and performance accountability while leveraging the operational infrastructure of an established ambulance provider.

Competing for the County's Ambulance Contract

In May 2025, San Joaquin County released its long-anticipated Request for Proposals for emergency ambulance transport services. The RFP included two service zones encompassing more than 1,000 square miles and a population exceeding 600,000 residents.

The CENCAL Fire and EMS Authority submitted a comprehensive proposal to provide emergency ambulance services within both service areas. Following a competitive evaluation process, San Joaquin County selected CENCAL as the most responsive proposer for Zones X and Y.

In February 2026, the San Joaquin County Board of Supervisors formally awarded the Exclusive Operating Area ambulance contract to CENCAL, with services scheduled to begin May 1, 2026.

Improving Emergency Medical Service Delivery

One of the primary benefits of the CENCAL model is the fire agencies will manage the system through an integrated fire and ambulance deployment and response model. Under the new system:

- Additional ambulance unit hours will be added to the system and federal reimbursement funding will be reinvested to further enhance the system.
- Fire and ambulance resources will be dispatched simultaneously through a unified communications center. Fire and Ambulance resources will be dispatched through the same Computer Aided (CAD) dispatch system, utilize the same records management system (including electronic pre-hospital reports) and utilize the same mobile data tablet systems to improve system performance and coordination.
- Emergency responders will operate within a coordinated regional deployment model.

These enhancements are expected to improve response coordination, increase ambulance availability, and strengthen overall emergency medical service delivery across San Joaquin County.

Leveraging Public Agency Funding Opportunities

As a public agency, the CENCAL Fire and EMS Authority is eligible to participate in the Public Provider Ground Emergency Medical Transport (PP-GEMT) program. This federal supplemental reimbursement program provides additional cost recovery for qualifying Medi-Cal emergency medical transports delivered by public providers.

Participation in PP-GEMT helps support expanded ambulance deployment levels and enhances the financial sustainability of the regional EMS system.

A Model for Regional Service Delivery

The creation of the CENCAL Fire and EMS Authority demonstrates how special districts and local public agencies can work collaboratively to address complex service delivery challenges. By combining regional governance, public oversight, and strategic partnerships, the participating agencies developed a model designed to strengthen emergency medical services for the communities they serve.

As California communities continue to explore innovative approaches to regional service delivery, the CENCAL model offers an example of how collaborative governance structures can enhance service coordination while maintaining local accountability.