



Stony Brook **CURRENTS**

Vol. XXI, No. 2

The Newsletter of the Suffield Historical Society

June 2026

Suffield Volunteer Ambulance Association

**Celebrating 50
Years!**



**Join them at the
50th Anniversary Gala
November 21, 2026**

IT STARTED WITH AN ACCIDENT IN 1966

Excerpts from the July 2000 First National Bank Newsletter "Suffield Accounts" by Maggie Philippon

"Our town has had an ambulance service since 1948 ... run as a volunteer effort by the Suffield Police Department. ... Their only training was basic first aid. The ambulance by law could only be dispatched if a physician ordered it. Despite efforts to move quickly, more than an hour often passed before hospital care was available. It was that elapsing time one summer night in 1966 that changed Bill Phelps forever. He and two high school chums followed a Suffield police car answering an emergency call. A man on a motorcycle had been forced off the road by an oncoming car. Broken and bleeding, the man lay writhing in pain.

"Bill and his teenage friends viewed the accident scene and watched while no one could help the injured man. They had to wait for a doctor to arrive. Police officers waited without skills or authority to give medical assistance. The ambulance team was unable to do anything but transport. The man died ... Bill stood by helplessly, filled with a sense that things should be different and desperately wanting to make those things happen.

"Bill joined the Navy and witnessed modern equipment available for emergency care and soon saw the difference that medical rescue training made. After his tour of duty, he became a Suffield police officer and worked on the ambulance team...

"A 1972 nationwide study estimated that 'one in five people who die in emergencies could be saved by trained rescue squads.' ... Federal and state regulations soon followed, which mandated ambulance standards, equipment, and emergency personnel training. In 1973, as part of our police department, Bill graduated from one of the first Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) classes available in Connecticut...

"But neither our small police department nor our volunteer fire department was ready to assume responsibility for these strict guidelines, lengthy training, and associated liabilities. Suffield turned to an ad hoc committee which united these two departments with the Emergency Aid Association [now called Suffield Community Aid], concerned citizens, and local physicians. From this committee rose the bylaws for the Suffield Volunteer Ambulance Association, which was organized in 1976. Bill was the natural selection to be Suffield's Chief.

"Bill's position was paid by taxpayers. The ambulance, maintenance, insurance, supplies, and training continued to be funded by the annual letter of appeal to the entire community. But Suffield generosity didn't stop there, as many volunteers stepped forward to train and staff the ambulance around the clock."

2 REFLECTIONS ON THE HISTORY OF THE SVAA

Lt. Daniel K. Kehoe, Ret. (Active 1982-2009, PAT Team until 2016)

For more history and information on the SVAA, go to www.svaahistory.com which Dan Kehoe is creating.

Send comments and corrections to dankehoe@bigfootlabs.com

My attachment to the Suffield Volunteer Ambulance Association (SVAA) spans more than 30 years – from a newly minted “CPR-Driver” in May 1982 to a lieutenant resigning from active shifts in January 2009, but continuing as Director of the Patient Advocate Program (PAT Team) until 2016. Much of what I share here is from memory, backed by some hard documentation to pin dates on things, but nonetheless it is information that may not be recorded or known by anyone else. When I stopped taking active shifts in 2009, I had the privilege of having continuously served longer than anyone else. Today, some others who started with the SVAA just after I did now claim that honor.

Others can provide a detailed timeline, a listing of Chiefs, plus any historical anecdotes that pre-date me; but the SVAA that I was most familiar with began in 1976 with Chief “Billy” Phelps. Aside from his honor as the first official SVAA Chief, he was known to us in EMT class as a live human who tolerated us as we practiced putting a plastic airway down his throat without him gagging.

From my vantage point, my reflections on the SVAA’s history are grouped not solely by dates, but by different eras – demarcated by key growth periods. The sum of these eras takes us from the beginning of my first-hand experience in 1982 until 2016. It is the job of those active today to record the history, these last 10 years and forward.

Although I was not present in 1976 when the SVAA was founded, I was privileged to meet and work with the volunteers I came to respect as the founders, some of whom were still present when I joined in 1982.

THE SVAA BECOMES A STAND-ALONE EMS PROVIDER IN TOWN (1976)

The tenor of the SVAA in those early days, when it became a stand-alone, private organization separate from the Town of Suffield, was one of townspeople caring for townspeople. In support of the SVAA, the Town paid the Chief’s salary and benefits and provided a bay for the ambulance, first in the

police station bay in the Town Hall and then in the old Annex building at 97 Mountain Road.

The founders literally were the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick makers of town. Many of the earliest volunteers were from the North Main Street crowd who not only contributed to the finances of this new start-up but also volunteered their time to train emergency responders and to take shifts (initially 12 hours long). They banded together to take the develop-

ing mantle of a new standard of pre-hospital EMS care which was blossoming around the country.

Much of what was learned when saving troops during Korea and Vietnam was put into practice with these new civilian ambulance crews comprised of Medical Response Technicians (MRTs) and Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) who would form the basis for crews in the early SVAA. Much excitement flowed from watching Roy Desoto and Johnny Gage on TV’s popular show, “Emergency!”



CHIEF BILLY PHELPS IS FLANKED BY FIFTEEN OF SUFFIELD’S FIRST VOLUNTEER EMTs IN FRONT OF THE NEW \$30,000 AMBULANCE FITTED WITH STATE-OF-THE-ART MEDICAL EQUIPMENT

Through the late 1970s until my appearance there, the SVAA took around 300 calls annually. One felt “lucky” just to receive a call and would brag to the others about the experience, sometimes enduring a month of shifts before finally racing down the road with lights and sirens blazing. Today, the SVAA takes several thousand calls annually.

People unfamiliar with EMS in Suffield should know that the Suffield Police Department provided the first ambulance service for decades – though old timers relate white-knuckle stories of calling in an off-duty officer who threw the patient in the back of the old ambulance and screamed over the radio to the hospital while traveling at break-neck speed – sometimes with no one in the back with the patient!

What was foundational about the SVAA in 1976 was that it not only moved the responsibility for pre-hospital care away from the police with their “swoop and scoop” means of emergency care, it also used medically trained crews to do some pre-hos-

pital care on-scene (blood pressure, oxygen, stabilize fractures, etc.) before “swooping and scooping” the patients themselves! The other key difference for Suffield was that the SVAA was its own entity – a third emergency responder in town: police, fire and ambulance. While many towns were starting to provide EMS services via their fire departments, Suffield created a stand-alone third agency in the SVAA.

To this day, I’m not sure what caused it, but when the ambulance service separated from the police department to become an independent EMS agency, its volunteers came to be seen as second-class responders, less capable and less experienced. The prevailing attitude of the police seemed to be, “We’ll call you if we need you, little lady!” – making us separate but not equal. The police still respond first to ambulance calls in town,

providing immediate EMS services while waiting for the ambulance to arrive. Beginning in October 2025, the Suffield Fire Department also became first responders to EMS calls.

In fairness, early SVAA volunteers earned the second-class reputation when more than once, all three crew members hopped out of the ambulance – eager to have gotten our first call in weeks – and rushed into the patient’s house empty-handed with no oxygen, no trauma bag, and no stretcher!

It would be decades before the SVAA would be considered a peer in emergency response, perhaps owing to a new generation of younger cops and firemen who replaced the old guard. These younger cops had a distaste for responding to EMS calls (because it wasn’t catching bad guys!)

HOW THINGS HAVE CHANGED!

by Deborah Long-Smith, Second Director of the SVAA

Everyone knows how much health care has changed over the past 50 years. We have an abundance of technology that enhances our lives, but there is a growing perception that human attention and personal time are in short supply. And yet the SVAA continues to keep abreast of the new emergency care techniques and also freely dedicate themselves and their time to the health of this community.

A key provision of the 1966 Highway Safety Act, signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson, was Standard 11. This standard recognized the need for pre-hospital care and became the start of the modern Emergency Medical Services (EMS) system. It drove improvements in equipment, personnel and system development.

The first evening course for EMTs was held at Suffield High School and was taught by Enid Shea and Enfield’s Police Lt. Ron Marcotte. I was selected to be in the class because I lived near the station and could respond quickly to calls. The first Suffield ambulance was big and chunky. It was called “The Cadillac” and also known as “The Blue Goose.”

In 1976, Suffield began transitioning from an ambulance service run by the police department to a community-staffed ambulance. At first, the police department dispatcher received all calls for medical emergencies. Using a land-line, the dispatcher called through a list of phone numbers to assemble an ambulance crew. No one had pagers. Moreover, once in the ambulance, the hand-held radio only connected to the dispatcher and nowhere else. As a result, a lot of precious time was lost.

One of the first calls I received, shortly after training, was from Police Sgt. Murray Phelps around 1 a.m. There was an extreme emergency at Sweet Life Foods. My mind defined “extreme emergency” as a building collapse, a multi-victim accident or a fire. The crew consisted of another rookie medical technician and me along with Officer Bobby Williams, who had recently finished his shift and was tired. Our patient, the only one, demanded transportation to Rockville Memorial Hospital in Vernon, where the doctor diagnosed a bleeding ulcer. Officer Williams had driven to the hospital but the other rookie agreed to drive us back to Suffield. Williams dozed off but neither the other rookie nor I knew the way home. When Williams woke up, he said, “Where the hell are we?” as we had wandered far afield. Navigation technology, i.e. GPS, has eliminated this problem.

On another outing, a driver had a problem backing the ambulance into the bay at the old police station located at the Town Hall, where the ambulance was stored. He put the vehicle in reverse, opened the driver’s door and leaned out to see where he was going. Oops! Crash! The car door had smacked into the garage door. Thanks to technology, now rear view mirrors and back-up cameras are standard equipment on ambulances.

...continued on page 4

It became a necessity early on that crews should wear pagers when on duty. Since volunteer shifts were 12 hours long (6 a.m. to 6 p.m.), having pagers freed up volunteers from having to sit at the cramped Annex building to await a call that rarely came. Crews could roam around town, with the audio muted until a page came through (pagers were on the police frequency) but they still had to get to a phone in a hurry when the pager beeped and announced: "Ambulance personnel call police headquarters!" Note that the location of the emergency was not broadcast.

Crews would dash to a phone (this was before cellphones), call the police dispatcher on the non-emergency line, and identify that they were on the crew. The dispatcher could also call crew members individually from a paper list. The dispatcher would reveal the location of the emergency, and the volunteer would tell the dispatcher either, "I'm heading to the Annex" or "I'll go right to the scene." When the ambulance driver signed on the radio, the dispatcher would tell the ambulance driver who was coming

to the Annex, and who they would meet at the scene. Although this awkward system usually worked, it broke down during major accidents or fires when dispatchers were focused on handling emergencies rather than tracking responders. They were often so overwhelmed with 911 calls that they sometimes never answered the non-emergency line we used to call in.

It was not until the mid-1990s, when the SVAA got its own frequency and portable radios for the on-duty crew, that better communications and streamlined response times ensued. When their pagers activated, crews simply picked up their portable radios and announced their intentions. Other crewmembers heard things like, "Medic 508 responding to the Annex" or "Medic 2 responding to the scene." At least the ambulance driver could now gauge independently if he could respond immediately or if he had to wait for crewmembers to pull into the Annex lot. The police dispatcher was no longer actively involved in assembling the crew, but could still hear what was going on.

HOW THINGS HAVE CHANGED

The fledgling SVAA soon developed a monthly duty roster with designated 12-hour shifts. Dispatch communications improved significantly when each volunteer received a pager. Still, anything anyone said via the mic was heard on scanners all over town.

One evening, a crew responded to a motorcycle accident in West Suffield. The driver had obviously been drinking and had visible injuries. The team felt he should go to the hospital. He insisted that he "was fine" and did not want to go, then he tried to bribe the attendants to stop their insistence that he go. Finally, he agreed to get into the ambulance. He was strapped to the stretcher; the attendant was belted into her seat and the driver radioed dispatch that they were headed to Hartford Hospital. The investigating officer, following in the cruiser, also sent information to the dispatcher about the accident and the identity of the patient. Dispatch reported that there was an outstanding warrant on him! The patient overheard the entire conversation. When the ambulance driver stopped at the light in West Suffield Center, the patient undid the strap and bolted out of the ambulance. He got away but was found the next day hiding in a tobacco shed.

Suffield and surrounding towns have Mutual Aid agreements along with comprehensive disaster planning policies and procedures. On October 3, 1979, Suffield received a mutual aid request from Windsor Locks to go to the Ramada Inn. Once we arrived, we never even got out of the rig, as the State Police redirected us to the Bradley Field Fire Department. There we found standing water in the building and three injured firefighters. This was no disaster drill - it was the real thing. A tornado, striking without warning, had devastated the area. Disaster procedures were implemented. Fortunately, the firefighters' injuries were not serious, and we were able to transport them safely to the hospital. Even so, the events of the day remain vivid in our memories to this day.

Improvements in pre-hospital care are very closely tied to improvements in information and communications technology as well as the advanced training of our crews. The SVAA responders now have mobile phones, shoulder mics, as well as access to defibrillators and hospital-to-field communication. It makes me wonder where we will be in the next 50 years!

....continued from page 3



DEBORAH POHANKA (NOW LONG-SMITH) WITH
TOM BELLMORE, THEN SVAA BOARD MEMBER AND
NEWLY APPOINTED FIRE CHIEF.

INTRODUCTION OF CENTRALIZED EMERGENCY DIRECTION (CMED) AND BILLING PATIENTS FOR SERVICES (1980s)

Two fairly significant changes came in the mid-to-late 1980s. First, SVAA began to participate in the CMED radio network – a radio system that allowed crews to contact the emergency department enroute to the hospital and give a report about their incoming patient. Second, the SVAA began to bill patients (through their insurance) for ambulance transports.

Prior to including a CMED radio in ambulances, all communications to the outside world were done by relaying through the Suffield Police dispatcher on the police frequency. The ambulance driver would tell the police dispatcher their patient report: “We are enroute to St. Francis Hospital, patient is on oxygen, three liters by mask, collared, and backboarded, BP is 150/82, ETA is 15 minutes.”

The dispatcher would then call up the hospital and relay this incoming report. This system was fraught with problems, notably because the driver on the radio was often not an EMT and obviously wasn’t taking care of the patient at the moment, so the relayed medical information was often too brief or incorrect (like the kids’ “telephone” game). Secondly, the police might not have a chance to relay the information before the ambulance arrived.

The introduction of CMED radio into our care portfolio allowed SVAA crews to contact hospitals directly, give much more precise patient status (the EMT caring for the patient in the back had a handset within reach) and even coordinate with other incoming ambulances for major calls or a paramedic intercept to give more advanced medical assistance.

With CMED, SVAA crews had reached a proud moment of participating in the EMS world just like the big city ambulances. It further cemented our place as an independent EMS provider, not just an add-on service of the other Town agencies.

There were few events in the SVAA history that caused such dissent and division as the decision to bill patients for their ambulance ride. From its inception, the SVAA mantra was a good story – we’re volunteers and, while our crews get exactly the same training as big city EMTs, we don’t charge when you call the ambulance because we are all volunteers!

The conflating of “volunteer labor” with “free ambulance rides” did not last beyond the day when the SVAA realized it was going broke from high insurance rates, increasing medical supply costs, and the need to buy a second ambulance because of the increasing call volume. Donations and fundraising couldn’t make up the difference.

But the very mention of charging our patients stuck in the craw of many of the original founding volunteers. They fought the idea – and some even quit – when a reluctant SVAA began to charge for its services in January 1991. When we started to charge patients – even though most insurance policies covered ambulance rides – a bit of innocence from the SVAA’s founding days was lost forever. Yes, we were proudly participating in the CMED radio system just like the paid professional big city ambulance companies, but we were now charging our patients – just like the paid professional big city ambulances!



MOBILE OPEN HOUSES BRING NEIGHBORS TOGETHER WITH SVAA CREWS ALLOWING THEM TO EXPLORE THE EQUIPMENT IN A NON-EMERGENCY SITUATION.

THE MOBILE OPEN HOUSE PROGRAM (1989)

The late 1980s saw the first Mobile Open House visits to neighborhoods in Suffield. The visits partially acted as a recruitment drive for new volunteers and as an opportunity to educate the community. These fun events let families and especially children experience an ambulance close up (to lessen fear through learning). Though trying to distinguish ourselves as a separate and equal emergency provider in town, the SVAA invited and shared the spotlight with the police and fire departments because our combined goal was rescue. These events were extremely well received and provided a chance for SVAA volunteers to proudly show off our ambulances and medical training. They have continued to the present day.

THE PAT TEAM CREATED TO SERVE SECONDARY PATIENTS (1997)

At age 51, after 15 years of service, I was burned out from thousands of calls and hinted that I might leave the SVAA. Chief Lynn Bergenholz suggested that instead of leaving, I should work with the families of patients and victims. This idea flowered over the following year and developed into the PAT Program (Patient Advocate Team). The concept of the PAT Team was to work with the family of the patient, described in the EMS world as “sec-

6ondary patients,” while the crew focused on the person with the medical problem.

In EMS training, these “secondary patients” receive little to no attention from the responding EMS crews in the heat of an emergency, even though they probably were the very people intimately involved in the loved one’s emergency and called 911 for them.

The SVAA PAT Program was patterned after hospital patient advocacy, such as when a retired nurse working as a volunteer would assist family members anxious to hear about what was happening with their loved one behind closed hospital doors only a few feet away. Similarly, our PAT Program was designed to use people-oriented, compassionate and experienced EMS volunteers willing to respond at the same time as the ambulance to a serious call, immediately separating and informing the family of

what was taking place. This provides mental relief for the family member (who would otherwise hear, “Stand back, ma’am, and let us do our job!”), but shelters the busy EMS crew from a well-meaning but panicked family member interfering at the scene.

The PAT Program developed response guidelines (agreed to by the police) to dispatch Pat Team members on critical calls (untimely death, child injured, heart attack, etc.) in order to off-load the care of the secondary patients from the first responders.

The PAT Team member might also transport family members to the hospital (itself a relief to the busy crew) or be called upon to do death notifications. They would do all of this usually in the first two hours of the call and end their involvement by connecting the family to long-term care such as ministers, counselors, or aid agencies.

SVAA INNOVATIONS *by Don Miner, former Deputy Chief, current SVAA Trustee and member of the PAT Team*

The Suffield Volunteer Ambulance Association (SVAA), is unique in many respects. As it celebrates its 50th anniversary, this non-profit agency enjoys an extraordinarily strong relationship with the community it serves and has a record of unique solutions to providing service.

In 2001, with the long relationship with Bradley Airport Fire Department paramedics ending, but being somewhat limited in resources, the SVAA started up a paramedic level service which focused on staffing during the peak hours with two full-time paramedics, including the Chief. Paid staff was funded by an arrangement with the Town of Suffield. The two paid paramedics were supplemented by actively recruiting volunteer paramedics, something no other service in Connecticut did. Scholarships for the 2,000-hour paramedic training were frequently offered to entice volunteers. Paramedic staffing is important because of the significant capabilities they bring to the call, including extensive medications for cardiac and respiratory care as well as advanced diagnostic abilities. Over the years, paramedic level staffing has increased from peak hours to nearly 24-7 and most days the SVAA has two full crews on duty, staffed at the paramedic level.

The Association has had a number of unique programs over the years, including:

- Patient Advocate Team in which an experienced EMT responds to the scene of the most serious calls to support the patient’s families. This program is now in its 28th year and is the only one of its kind still in existence in Connecticut.
- A mapping program, written by long-time member Dan Kehoe, which predated Google Maps by a number of years. Kehoe also wrote a computerized schedule program which was in use for nearly 20 years.
- Advanced EMT level of care which allows provider members to practice at a higher level of care without all the training commitment at the paramedic level. The AEMTs can treat diabetic reactions, most difficulty breathing cases, severe allergic reactions and many others. Currently, it is the only service in Connecticut operating at this level, although others are considering it.
- Technology, including state of the art cardiac monitors, patient scales tied to a software program that calculates medication doses based on the patient’s weight and ultrasound.
- A program which polls patients about their experience with the service and, when appropriate, follows up on the feedback.
- A quality assurance program, which, in coordination with the medical control hospital, reviews patient care reports for issues and training needs.

Finally, Suffield Volunteer Ambulance Association has maintained an incredibly positive relationship with the community. One result of this relationship was that when the organization built a new facility, half the cost was paid for by donations from residents and businesses in Suffield.

The PAT Team's willing inclusion in critical calls by the police department helped solidify the SVAA's stance as a mature and competent agency and a full team member of the Town's emergency response.

Throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, I was pleased to speak at various national EMS conferences about the PAT Program and help establish formal PAT Teams in volunteer EMS entities throughout Connecticut, New England, and the U.S.

A second ambulance arrived in 2006 to address the growing call volume in town (approximately 1,400 calls annually by 2007).

The problem? The SVAA had only one bay in the old Town Annex building! The Suffield Fire Department gave the SVAA use of one of its bays in the main firehouse, and for a while, the second ambulance was kept there.

THE GROWTH FROM THE OLD ANNEX TO THE ZAK CENTER BUILDING (2007)

But what was really needed was a new building—a building to call our own, and big enough to house our two, and soon a third ambulance, as well as our Duty Officer vehicle. Through the generosity of Michael Zak who established a foundation to honor his mother and father, Mary Anne Zak, a much-loved Suffield resident and Amiel Zak, himself a popular teacher, the SVAA's new Zak Center was built on land donated by Krystal Woods Developers, LLC. The SVAA moved into the new headquarters at 205 Bridge Street in March 2007.

In April 2007, Chief Guy Henry hosted a public open house in the new facility, which featured four bays (three for ambulances and one for the Duty Officer vehicle or trailer) with large training and meeting facilities, a day room for the crew, sleeping accommodations for out-of-town volunteers, and backup environmental systems (which came in handy during the October 2011 week-long snow storm that crippled the region).

Longtime volunteers such as myself saw this new facility as a well-deserved "thank you" after decades of service in the cramped Annex. The SVAA was proud to offer its new meeting room facility to other organizations in town as gratitude for the widespread support which made it possible.

With the advent of the new building, the number of EMTs from surrounding towns who volunteered for Suffield increased. Volunteers came from as far away as Colchester and Middletown to serve. In three decades, the SVAA matured from a small, neighbor-helping-neighbor operation to a full-blown EMS entity of which the entire town can be proud.



LEFT TO RIGHT: THE THEN AMBULANCE CHIEF GUY HENRY, SVAA PRESIDENT BILL BORCHERS, MICHAEL ZAK AND HIS MOTHER, MARY ANNE ZAK, CUT THE RIBBON AT THE 2007 GRAND OPENING OF THE SVAA ZAK AMBULANCE CENTER ON BRIDGE STREET

Two other important changes to SVAA were the creation of an SVAA Officer structure implemented in 1998 and the introduction of the Paramedic Program in 2001.

It has been 10 years since I took my last PAT Team call. I let my 33-year Connecticut EMT certification expire when I moved to North Carolina. However, I have continued to hear good reports on the steady growth and improvement of the SVAA. Under the leadership of Chief John Spencer, the SVAA continues its mission to provide emergency ambulance response and related EMS services to the greater Suffield area. It handled more than 2,400 calls in the latest year of statistics. That is an eight-fold increase in call volume since I first replied to a mailing in the Spring of 1982 looking for new ambulance members.

I wrote:

*"I am interested in volunteering on the ambulance.
I would need complete training."*

— Dan Kehoe



THE CURRENT AMBULANCE AT HOME IN ONE OF THE THREE BAYS AT THE SVAA ZAK CENTER ON BRIDGE STREET.

A DISCUSSION WITH JOHN SPENCER, CHIEF OF THE SUFFIELD VOLUNTEER AMBULANCE ASSOCIATION

by Lois Scozzari

Recently, I had the opportunity to sit down and speak with John Spencer, the Chief of Suffield's Volunteer Ambulance Association.

Spencer was selected after a "grueling," multi-layered interview process. First came an initial phone interview. Next was a gauntlet of interviews and "meet and greets" hosted by the Ambulance Association members. Finally, he met in person with Suffield town leaders. Altogether, it was about a two-month process.

Spencer grew up in Manchester and East Hartford, Connecticut. After graduating from high school, he was interested in a career in law enforcement. Like many people who initially consider police work, he began his public service career as an EMT with the City of Hartford and later attended paramedic school. After spending 15 years working in various roles within Emergency Medical Services (EMS), he decided to pursue a college degree. He received a BS in EMS Administration and a Master's in Public Administration (MPA) from Anna Maria College. "I didn't go to college until my mid-thirties," he admits. However, he acknowledges that his experience up to that time was extremely valuable, particularly his work as an administrative operations supervisor for a commercial EMS organization serving Hartford and surrounding communities. This position exposed him to the challenges of both urban and rural settings.

Spencer is married to Rebecca, a nurse at Suffield Middle School, and together they have two children, Emily, 11, and Owen, 7. Emily is involved in dance and drama and will be entering middle school in the fall. Owen loves baseball and is lucky enough to have his dad as his coach. Spencer values family time, especially when they hike together on one of the many trails available in Granby, where they live.

When I arrived at the ambulance station, Spencer was just finishing a workout in the gym built on the premises for the team to relax and de-stress. The job involves tense and complicated situations, and the team recognizes that a conveniently located workout room is both great therapy and a convenient way to stay fit. The gym was built with a grant from the Amiel and Mary Anne Zak Public Service Fund.

Spencer considers the psychological health of his staff a high priority, as well as their ability to deal professionally with the challenging situations they routinely encounter. Good mental health is a top priority for Spencer, and he advocates for mental health awareness and support throughout the community. This philosophy works hand-in-hand with the development of other programs. One recent free program, introduced this year, offers training in opioid

overdose reversal and Narcan administration. Spencer says this program has helped decrease the number of opioid fatalities in the area.

During his tenure, the service has expanded its role in the community and guided SVAA into becoming a state-of-the-art, award-winning organization.

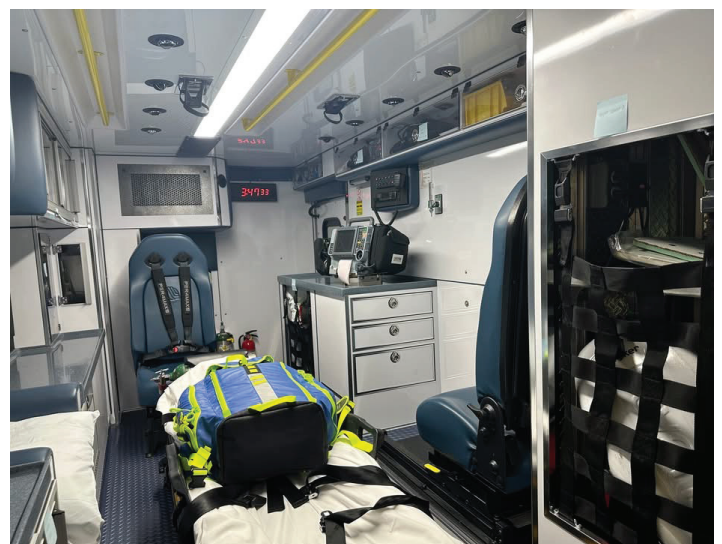
In March 2026, the SVAA received the 2026 Agency of the Year Award from the National EMS Management Association.

When asked for words of wisdom for aspiring EMTs, he said they "should ride with the crew and see what we do!" There is a whiteboard in the front hall of the building where new ideas are posted. "New ideas start in-house—there are no bad ideas, just those that need discussion."

On the topic of the "active bystander," Chief Spencer believes it is better to intervene and be wrong than not assist at all. SVAA serves Suffield but can also provide mutual aid to East Granby, Windsor Locks, and Enfield. The organization can be seen at most public events in town and even maintains a presence at Stafford Speedway, cooperating with the Stafford Ambulance Association.



SVAA CHIEF, JOHN SPENCER



THE INTERIOR OF THE CURRENT SVAA AMBULANCE LOOKS MORE LIKE A HOSPITAL ROOM THAN A MOTOR VEHICLE.

John is understandably proud of the emergency vehicles housed in the ambulance bay. The fleet currently includes six vehicles: two support vehicles purchased in 2020 and four ambulances—two are 2025 models, one is a 2022 model, and one is a 2017 model that is scheduled to be replaced by a new 2027 vehicle currently on order. Maintaining a modern ambulance fleet comes at a steep price. John notes that the price of a fully equipped ambulance is comparable to that of a mid-sized home, with the patient stretcher alone costing approximately \$20,000. The interior of the ambulance offers a compact space built for maximum efficiency so that medicines and equipment are within easy reach. The usual bench running along the side of the compartment has been replaced with safer, single adjustable seats equipped with seat belts.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of ambulance service in Suffield, and there is much to celebrate. In its 50 years of operation, SVAA has grown alongside the town, the population it serves, and the increasingly expanded role it plays in the community. Each emergency vehicle proudly displays the words “Serving the Community Since 1976.”

For five decades, health care providers and ambulance society members have had the privilege of caring for the community with professionalism, dedication, and compassion. The SVAA looks forward to serving Suffield in the years to come.



LEFT TO RIGHT: CHIEF JOHN SPENCER, ADMINISTRATIVE DIRECTOR JENNIFER FERGUSON AND CAPTAIN JACOB AUDET. THE SVAA WAS AWARDED THE 2026 NATIONAL EMS MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION AGENCY OF THE YEAR AWARD. SPENCER, AUDET AND FERGUSON TRAVELED TO WASHINGTON, D.C. TO RECEIVE THE AWARD AT THE NEMSMA INAUGURAL CONFERENCE, JOINING SEVERAL HUNDRED EMS LEADERS FROM ACROSS THE COUNTRY.



SUFFIELD VOLUNTEER AMBULANCE 50TH ANNIVERSARY GALA

by Chief John Spencer, Megan Schwartz and Karl Cicitto

For 50 years, the Suffield Volunteer Ambulance Association (SVAA) has been the heartbeat of emergency response in our community, answering thousands of calls, providing lifesaving care, and standing ready for every moment that matters most.

On November 21, 2026, we will celebrate this remarkable milestone with a black-tie optional gala at the Marriott Hartford/Windsor Airport. The evening will feature a cocktail reception, plated dinner, special recognition of individuals who have made a lasting impact on SVAA and the community, live entertainment, dancing, and the opportunity to take home exceptional items from our silent auction. We expect to welcome more than 300 guests, including SVAA members and alumni, local officials, community leaders, healthcare professionals, and dedicated supporters. This milestone celebration will honor our proud history while raising vital funds to sustain our mission for generations to come, and we would be honored to have you join us in making it possible. Through every call, training and community event, the SVAA remains ready to respond, thanks in large part to the generosity of our donors. Proceeds from the gala will directly support this work by helping to equip and train our dedicated providers, including those advancing their certifications; maintaining state-of-the-art ambulances and lifesaving medical equipment; and expanding public education and safety programs such as CPR training, Stop the Bleed, and community event standbys.

There are several ways to be part of this special evening: attend in person, donate to the silent auction or become a sponsor. Details are at <https://svaa26.auctria.events>.



CHAIRWOMAN OF EVENTS PAULETTE BROCKETT SHARES A SVAA INFO TABLE AT SUFFIELD-ON-THE-GREEN WITH LORI BASSETT
BACK ROW: DON MINER, CHIEF CHRIS SCHMECK AND SCOTT ADAMS



1989 NEW AMBULANCE DEDICATION WITH DAVID BELDEN AT THE PODIUM.
BACK ROW: CHAIRMAN SONNY OSOWEICKI, CHET OSOWEICKI, JAY NASH, CHIEF CHRIS SCMECK AND TIM GEORGE. THE PERREAULT FAMILY DONATED THE MONEY TO BUY TWO AMBULANCES FOR THE SVAA.



ABOVE: DISASTER TRAINING EXERCISE AT BRADLEY FIELD IN 1989.
RIGHT: FALL PLANTINGS GRACE THE BASE OF THE SIGN IN FRONT OF THE AMIEL AND MARY ANNE ZAK AMBULANCE CENTER AT 205 BRIDGE STREET



ABOVE: THE SVAA RECEIVED THE 2017 COMMISSIONER AWARD AT THE STATE CAPITOL.
LEFT TO RIGHT: MARGE OSOWEICKI, STATE REP. TAMI ZAWISTOWSKI, DEPUTY CHIEF SONNY OSOWEICKI, BOB LOWELL AND LINDA STEVENSON



LEFT: CHIEF SCHMECK (1982-1994) GATHERS WITH THE VOLUNTEER RESPONDERS IN FRONT OF THE AMBULANCE.

HOORAY FOR VOLUNTEERS

by Sara Zak, SHS President

The Suffield Historical Society could not exist without volunteers, and it is impossible to thank them enough!

There have been many exceptional contributors since I became president in November 2025. This is a wonderful opportunity to acknowledge them. On a personal note, seeing our members give their time and energy so generously has been truly inspiring to me.

Jackie Hemond and **Caroline D'Otreppe** have been building our relationship with the Suffield Public School system to find ways to engage students' interest in history. We look forward to hosting the student-designed *America250* exhibits in Academy Hall starting in June.

As we celebrate the 250th Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, I want to thank **Jackie Hemond** for coordinating the January newsletter, which focused on a variety of Revolutionary War topics. Many of the articles, written by **Jackie, Wendy Taylor, Sarah Donahue, Judith Hanmer, Dorian Taylor** and **Lois Scozzari**, highlighted Suffield residents. In addition, Jackie organized several programs on the Revolutionary War, including a very popular minibus tour of Revolutionary-era Suffield. Jackie is also the primary contributor to the Historical Society's Facebook page, constantly posting interesting tidbits about the old days in Suffield.

The Society also entered into an agreement with the West Suffield Village Improvement Association to lease Academy Hall, also known as The Grange, for one year while we evaluate the feasibility

of future ownership. Moving into Academy Hall has been exciting. Many thanks to the volunteers who helped prepare for the soft opening on May 13. The team, organized by **Norm Noble**, included **Chris Childs, Barry Sikes, Terry Mandirola, Anne Borg** and **Bob Borg**. Special thanks go to **Butch LaFleur** and **Mike Cardin**, recruited by Norm, to help with the heavy lifting.

The Grand Opening, scheduled for June 13, will highlight the Suffield Pharmacy Collection, the student-designed *America250* exhibits, and a special Revolutionary War exhibit from the Connecticut Museum of Culture and History.

The Annual Meeting on June 17 is an in-person-only event to encourage members and visitors to share in the excitement of the

Society's expansion into West Suffield. Following the meeting, the Connecticut Museum of Culture and History will present an exciting program titled *Tories, Spies and Traitors*. Which side would you have been on in 1776?

The spring workday at the King House marked the start of our move to Academy Hall. Fifteen volunteers, ranging in age from 4 to 90, helped to prepare the house, barn, and grounds for the visiting season.

Every ounce of effort, from

raking leaves and removing rocks to moving furniture and scrubbing floors, was appreciated. In particular, many thanks go to **Rose** and **Tim MacNeely** for their willingness and frequent help with just about everything.

I look forward to recognizing other volunteers in the next issue. We always need volunteers – ask how you can help!



ACADEMY HALL AT 1499 MOUNTAIN ROAD, WEST SUFFIELD
BUILT IN 1855 AS A SCHOOL AND LONG REFERRED TO AS THE GRANGE HALL,
ACADEMY HALL IS NOW A SECOND HOME FOR THE SUFFIELD HISTORICAL SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER SURVEY

Please take a moment to take this survey by clicking on the following link or scanning the QR code in order to provide feedback about the newsletter. Thank you!

<https://forms.gle/Yjz9NSdJ1zBQsNKMA>



Suffield Historical Society, Inc.
P.O. Box 893
Suffield, Connecticut 06078
(860) 668-5256

Our Website:
www.SuffieldHistoricalSociety.org

Contact Us:
SuffieldHistoricalSociety@gmail.com

Like Us on Facebook:
www.facebook.com/SuffieldConnecticutHistory/

King House Museum & Barn
232 South Main Street
&

Academy Hall
1499 Mountain Road
Open to the Public, Free
Saturdays
1:00 - 4:00 p.m.
through September

Newsletter
Maggie Philippon, Designer
Jackie Hemond, Editor and Compiler
Anita Wardell, Proofreader

NONPROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
PERMIT NO. 118
WATERBURY, CT

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

Upcoming Events

Saturday, June 13, 2026 9 a.m. - 2 p.m.

Tag Sale

Academy Hall Lawn, 1499 Mountain Road, West Suffield

Saturday, June 13, 2026 1-4 p.m.

Open House Day

King House Museum & Barn
and

Grand Opening at Academy Hall

*In case of a change in
schedule, please check our Facebook page.*

Wednesday, June 17, 2026 7:00 p.m.

Tories, Spies, and Traitors:

Divided Loyalty in Revolutionary Connecticut

7:00 p.m. Academy Hall

*Annual Meeting of the Suffield Historical Society
followed by another peek into Suffield life 250 years ago
Funded by the First Baptist Church, Suffield*

Saturday, June 27, 2026 1 p.m.

Stories of Brave Revolutionary War Era Potters, Pottery Wheel Demonstration

Plus! Make & Take Home a Clay Pinch Pot

880 Burbank Studios, 880 Burbank Avenue, Suffield

RSVP required at rsvphistory@gmail.com

\$5 per person, paid upon admission

A collaboration with Connecticut Landmarks

Tuesday, July 7, 2026 5:30-7:30 p.m.

Ice Cream Social on the Lawn

King House Museum & Barn

Rain date: Thursday, July 9

Saturday & Sunday, September 12-13

Suffield on the Green

*Stop by our booth on the Green for the latest SHS news!
The King House Museum & Barn will be open for your
enjoyment as well.*

SHS Officers: Sara Zak, *President*; Arthur Sikes, Jr., *Vice President*; Norm Noble, *Treasurer*; Chris Duni, *Secretary*. Trustees: Anne Borg, Christopher Childs, Jason Cromack, Caroline D'Otreppe, Jackie Hemond, Nancy Noble, William Sullivan, and Robin Zatony; Ed Chase, *Trustee Emeritus*