

Atlantic Cape program helping fill need for paramedics

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ATLANTIC CITY — Scott Mensinger started volunteering as a firefighter in Marmora when he was 16.

“From that I went into every facet of public safety,” the 28-year-old said, serving as security for concerts, as a summer police officer in Ocean City and eventually as an EMT for AtlantiCare.

On Tuesday, Mensinger advanced to the next level when he and seven others graduated as the inaugural class from Atlantic Cape Community College’s new paramedic sciences program, brought back to the college two years ago in response to a need in the community for workforce training in emergency response services.

“All of our programs in workforce development are based on need,” said Atlantic Cape Director of Workforce Development Sherwood Taylor, 58, of Mays Landing.

Taylor said the college works with employers to understand what their needs are, then creates training and certification programs to meet those needs. A federal grant allowed the college to modernize the previous paramedic training program, which only ran for one cohort and ended in 2011.

Taylor said that nationally, community colleges are playing a role in local workforce development.

“It’s really the way forward,” he said, as community colleges face enrollment declines across the state and country. “It’s a response to employers. It’s the shift, it’s what they want.”

The paramedic field is growing and the need for certified paramedics is high, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. The federal job outlook for the next decade projects 7% growth from 2018 to 2028, faster than the average for all occupations.

“Emergencies, such as car crashes, natural disasters and acts of violence, will continue to require the skills of EMTs and paramedics,” the federal outlook states.

For Mensinger, becoming a paramedic was the next step in a career he loves. The Marmora resident received a degree from Atlantic Cape in criminal justice with plans to pursue law enforcement, but after training to become an EMT through the Marmora Volunteer Fire Company six years ago, he changed his mind.

“I really fell in love with the job,” Mensinger said. “From there it was, ‘OK, this is a great job, but it’s very difficult to make a career out of being an EMT these days.’ Financially mainly, it’s that entry-level position.”

Rick Luderitz, 59, assistant director for paramedic and EMT training at Atlantic Cape, said paramedics can earn a starting salary of \$45,000 a year. Their job is much more expansive than that of an EMT.

“The class is very intensive, traditionally,” Luderitz said of paramedic training. “We’re not as specialized, but we have to know things across a much broader spectrum.”

For the past two years, the paramedic sciences students have been attending classes two nights a week and alternating Saturdays at Atlantic Cape's Charles D. Worthington campus in Atlantic City, in addition to their regular EMT jobs and required clinical time.

The training is difficult because paramedics can provide a more advanced level of care than an EMT, Luderitz said. That level of care is expanding as paramedics take on less traditional roles.

"Paramedic is evolving at an ever expanding rate," Luderitz said. "The scope of practice that I saw when I took my program is nothing compared to what these folks see, and what they see both in their careers and going forward 10 to 20 years from now, the scope of practice is going to be that much more advanced."

In other states, paramedics are being used for follow-up care for the patient to avoid hospital recidivism.

"Health systems are looking for ways of getting care to patients at a better cost," Luderitz said.

For the eight students in this inaugural paramedic sciences class, the path to becoming a paramedic doesn't end at graduation. The students all must pass their state exams before they become certified.

Mensingher said he is eager for the next step.

"It's been a very long process. It's been very stressful, so seeing the light is at the end of the tunnel is very shocking, because it's one of those, you didn't think it was ever going to happen," he said.

A second cohort of the paramedic sciences program is underway with 11 students, and Taylor said they hope to enroll another cohort in the spring.