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Medical helicopter lands in Walterboro

New base will be home to pilots, nurses and paramedics.

By GEORGE SALSBERY
gsalsberry@lowcountry.com

LifeNet 4 formally took up residence at Colleton Medical Center Wednesday.

Tim Weaver, area medical manager for Air Method, the parent company of LifeNet, said the medical emergency helicopter service established a base in Walterboro on Aug. 17 but the company "wanted to work the kinks out" before celebrating.

Weaver explained that the company established a

base in office space provided by the medical center that is adjacent to the helicopter landing pad near the emergency room.

Medical center and company officials worked together to transform the office space into living space for the helicopter crews assigned to the Walterboro base.

Weaver said the base will be home to the four pilots, four nurses and four paramedics who will man the medical emergency helicopter. The pilots work 12-hour shifts, Weaver explained. The nurses and paramedics

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Photo by GEORGE SALSBERY

CUTTING THE RIBBON. Colleton County Fire-Rescue Director Barry McRoy and Colleton Medical Center CEO Mitch Mongell team up to cut the ribbon during Wednesday ceremonies that officially opened the new LiftNet medical helicopter base.

Mongell and other hospital officials developed 'a welcoming relationship'

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work 24-hour shifts.

In addition to establishing a base near the landing pad, Weaver said, the company worked with the Lowcountry Regional Airport to obtain hanger space for the helicopter.

Weaver said the hanger will be manned by a mechanic assigned to work in Walterboro. It will be used to get the helicopter off the landing pad and under cover in inclement weather and will be used to conduct some maintenance on the helicopter.

Weaver suggested LifeNet might not have established a

base in Walterboro if not for Colleton Medical Center CEO Mitch Mongell and Colleton County Fire-Rescue Director Barry McRoy.

Mongell and McRoy also teamed up to cut Wednesday afternoon's red ribbon that signified the arrival of the new medical service.

Weaver pointed out that LifeNet seeks to have overlapping coverage among its seven aircraft working the Lowcountry. It was McRoy, he said, who took a look at the 35-mile rings that encircle each of LifeNet's existing bases and pointed out that many of them met in Walterboro.

"He showed us that we needed to be here," Weaver said. Those initial

conversations with Mongell and McRoy led LifeNet officials to begin stationing a helicopter at the medical center two days a week. Weaver suggested that the use of the medical center as a part-time base was used to gauge the effectiveness of establishing a permanent base.

Mongell and the other officials of Colleton Medical Center developed "a welcoming relationship" with the medical helicopter operation. "The medical center was willing to do what it could to get us down here."

Mongell said the permanent stationing of a medical helicopter right outside the emergency room door "means we can maintain a high quality of care. It means

that the medical center can quickly transfer patients "we are not capable of treating here, especially stroke and heart attack patients."

In addition to moving heart attack and stroke victims to Trident Medical Systems' facilities in Charleston and moving critically injured patients to the Medical University of South Carolina's Trauma Unit, Mongell added, the medical helicopter will be bringing patients to Colleton Medical Center from smaller hospitals in the area.

"This is something Barry (McRoy) and I worked on," Mongell said. McRoy downplayed his role. "It was Mitch that got them here. The hospital made concessions to get them here," McRoy said.