

New life for old EMS vehicles

3 ambulances will go to Guatemala

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The Courier-Journal

For the children at Guatemala's Hospicio San Jose de la Montaña, finding transportation is no small accomplishment.

The children are HIV-positive, and offers of assistance can be hard to come by.

But with the help of Louisville Metro EMS and local volunteers, the orphanage in Santa Lucia Milpas Altas will receive one of three retired ambulances that will be driven to Guatemala next week. The vehicle will take the children to medical appointments and be used for other outings.

"It's not a trivial thing to give someone a truck with four wheels," said Dr. Neal Richmond, director of Metro EMS.

The other two ambulances also will be put to good use. One will go to Quiche, a town of about 500,000 people for use by the Bomberos, the town's firefighter and EMS service.

The other ambulance will be donated to the village of Patzun, which has a population of about 40,000 in an area that continues to recover from Hurricane Stan. Currently, one truck is available to transport patients to the hospital free of charge.

A group of volunteers, led by Dr. John Barker, a local plastic surgeon, will drive the three ambulances through Mexico into Guatemala starting Saturday.

Barker and Richmond met nearly two years ago and began talking about the possibility of donating the ambulances, all of which have more than 100,000 miles on them and can no longer be used by Metro EMS. Midas Auto Service provided free servicing to make sure the ambulances were ready for the journey.

Barker, who has been on several medical missions to other countries, said he is looking forward to delivering the trucks.

"It's just the fun of seeing something here that we're not using and something they could use so much," Barker said.

It will take Barker and seven other volunteers nearly a week to drive the trucks to Guatemala, traveling about 1,300 miles to the U.S. border and then about 1,600 miles through Mexico before reaching the Central American country.

With three ambulances making the journey, Barker figured he could coordinate taking medical supplies, clothing and other equipment to the orphanage and other locations.

"We had these big three empty ambulances, and I thought that's a shame to have empty space," Barker said.

Barker partnered with the Louisville group Supplies Over Seas to get some supplies. And St. James Episcopal Church on La Grange Road collected goods from its congregation.

Richmond said he's happy that everything has come together to provide so many needed supplies to three Guatemalan communities.

"It's really a great way to link with some community that has all the same needs as we do but very few of the resources," Richmond said. "People go to extreme lengths to get help, and we're just trying to give them a couple of tools."

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