

As hard as it is to picture nowadays, there was once a time when you couldn't rely on an ambulance to transport you to the hospital or a paramedic to help keep you stable until you got there because the standard emergency services that we now consider a given simply didn't exist.

In the 1960s, if you had a medical emergency you'd have to choose between calling the police and a funeral home and being transported to the hospital via police van or hearse. However, service from these two parties was not guaranteed. Funeral homes tended to offer private ambulance services only in rich white neighborhoods. And the police would sometimes deny services to black people due to racism, or have them undergo longer wait times.

Officers were also not given any medical training beyond first aid, so individuals had to wait until they reached the hospital to receive treatment for their injuries. The absence of life saving pre-hospital care led to a large number of preventable deaths and adverse health outcomes that could have been avoided had the patients been transported by trained professionals. It was reported in 1966 by the National Academy of Sciences that nearly 50,000 deaths occurred as a result of ineffective ambulance crews and a lack of adequate hospitals within range per year. However, all this changed with the creation of the Freedom House Ambulance Service.

Inception

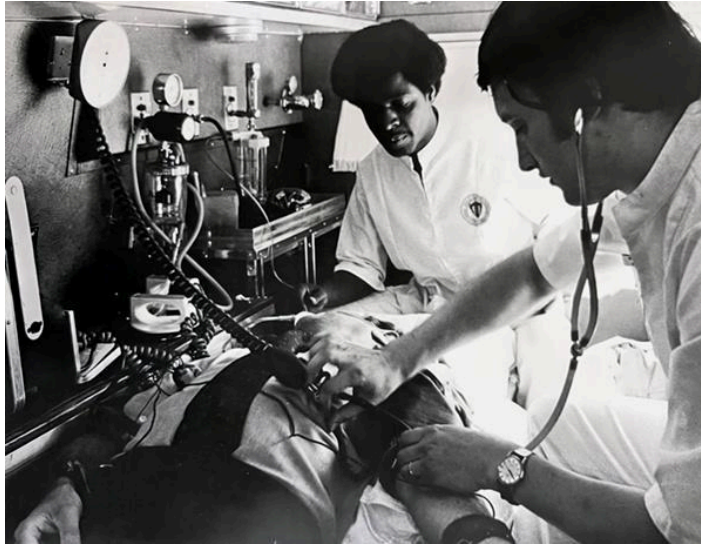
The idea for the Freedom House Ambulance Service came from Phil Hallen, the president of the Maurice Falk Medical Fund, which provided grants to programs aimed at providing services to minority communities and improving social welfare. As a former ambulance driver, Hallen saw firsthand the negative impact the current state of emergency services was having on people's health and wanted to help provide better emergency services to medically underserved communities in Pittsburgh. At the same time he also wanted to create more employment opportunities in the area as well. So he reached out to Freedom House Enterprise, a black led organization that did a lot of community based work aimed at improving the lives of African Americans, and asked if they'd like to partner with him on the new ambulance service that he had in mind and help him find recruits.

A friend later connected Hallen to Peter Safar, a fellow Pittsburgh resident known for being the father of CPR, who had experience in the world of emergency pre-hospital care. It was Safar who developed the extensive 32 week training that the recruits underwent to become the nation's first paramedics.



Training

Freedom House's first batch of recruits consisted of 25 students, all of which were African Americans from Pittsburgh's Hill District, a predominantly black community. They were considered unemployable as many had not finished high school, were ex-convicts, or veterans, which made it difficult for them to find and retain employment, until now. Under Safar's guidance, they spent 300 hours learning anatomy, physiology, advanced first aid, CPR, and defensive driving. They also underwent rotations at hospital ERs, operating rooms, radiology departments, and hospital morgues.



Accomplishments

The Freedom House Ambulance Service officially began its operations in 1968 and became the first ambulance service staffed with individuals who were able to provide care beyond first aid. They had an average response time of less than ten minutes, which was much quicker than what the black residents of the Hill District were used to. In their first year, the Freedom House Ambulance Service responded to almost 5,800 calls, transported 4,600 individuals, and saved 200 lives. Additionally, Freedom House paramedics were the first in the country to intubate a patient on the street, deliver an electric shock to a patient on the field, read and send an EKG while en route, and use Narcan in the field to treat an overdose.

Both internationally and domestically, Freedom House was seen as a revolution in emergency care and many began to follow in their footsteps. This was made easier when Freedom House's new medical director, Nancy Caroline, developed the first paramedic training curriculum, which was later recognized and adopted by the US government in 1975. And the high tech ambulances that Safar developed for Freedom House Ambulance Service, which were equipped with sirens, flashing lights, and radios that allowed paramedics to talk with doctors on their way to the hospital, were later set as the official ambulance standard and are still in use today.



Disbandment

The Freedom House Ambulance Service ran for eight years before it was shut down by Pittsburgh's mayor, Peter Flaherty. While Mayor Flaherty gave many reasons as to why he decided to shut down Freedom House, a number of people, including several of the former Freedom House paramedics, believed that the real reason was racism. And unfortunately, considering how the mayor later replaced Freedom House with a new ambulance service with an all white staff, it seems like that assessment was correct. When the former medical director of Freedom House, Nancy Caroline, accepted a position at the city's new ambulance service, she did so under the condition that the Freedom House dispatchers and paramedics were also hired on and that their ambulance crews weren't separated. While the Freedom House employees were hired upon her request, their ambulance crews were separated and the city's new ambulance service got many of them dismissed due to their criminal record and as a result of pass/fail exams which covered information they hadn't been taught, and some were simply reassigned to do non-essential work. In the end, only five members of Freedom House's paramedics stayed on, and only one advanced to a leadership position.

Legacy

While for a long time the story of Freedom House Ambulance Service had been lost to the pages of history, in recent years there have been a number of efforts made to preserve the legacy of our nation's first paramedics. In 2022, journalist and paramedic Kevin Hazzard, wrote a book titled [American Sirens: The Incredible Story of the Black Men Who Became America's First Paramedics](#) which documents the eight year history of this revolutionary agency. And just last year, PBS released a short documentary, [Freedom House Ambulance: The FIRST Responders](#), depicting the rise and fall of Freedom House with interviews with Phil Hallen, the founder of the organization, and some of the ambulance services' original paramedics.

However, the legacy of these black paramedics lives on in Pittsburgh through people like Amera Gilchrist, who was mentored by former Freedom House paramedic, John Moon, and became the first black person and woman to serve as an EMS Chief in Pittsburgh. It also lives on in programs like Freedom House 2.0 which aims to help high risk youth and nontraditional students prepare for a career in health and the Freedom House EMT Training program which was created by the Pittsburgh Bureau of EMS in honor of the original Freedom House Ambulance Service.

The Freedom House Ambulance Service completely transformed the field of emergency medicine and pioneered a new set of emergency services standards that has and continues to save thousands of lives every day. They're the reason why when we call 9-1-1 for an ambulance, we're confident that we will receive the life saving care we need on our way to the hospital. And for that, Freedom House has our heartfelt gratitude.



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