

## **Law Improves & Expands Air Ambulance Service While Safeguarding Wyoming Consumers**

Op-ed by Wyoming Representative Eric Barlow (HD-03) serves as House Majority Floor Leader. He lives in Gillette.

Providing opportunities for affordable, accessible healthcare services – especially in times of emergency – has long been one of our top priorities in the Wyoming State legislature. Every session we consider important healthcare measures to address everything from the high cost of prescriptions drugs, rural healthcare and telemedicine, services for seniors and veterans and much more.

Since 2014, we have heard from a number of Wyoming citizens who found themselves with air ambulance bills ranging from \$10,000 to \$600,000. At the same time, the Joint Labor, Health and Social Services Committee was looking at air ambulance issues as part of their interim studies. Our goal was to improve accessibility and reduce costs of lifesaving air ambulance services while protecting Wyoming consumers from gaps in coverage, misrepresentation and potential fraud.

After years of study, the legislature passed *HB0194, Air ambulance coverage-Medicaid* in 2019. The intent of this legislation was to leverage the Medicaid program as a means to cover air ambulance services for as many Wyoming citizens as possible. It included a provision allowing companies to offer subscription or membership plans relating to air ambulance transport services after they meet Wyoming Department of Insurance standards, just as other companies do. These are basic consumer protection requirements so Wyoming citizens can be confident they will get the services for which they paid.

Unfortunately, some air ambulance companies have recently circulated misinformation concerning the intent and impact of this legislation. They charge that they are no longer able to provide their service to consumers as a result of a law we passed in 2019. This is completely false.

Air ambulance companies and their attorneys participated throughout the legislative process. While passed in March of 2019, HB 194 did not take effect for a more than a year after passage, giving companies until April 1, 2020 to work with the Wyoming Department of Insurance. The Wyoming Department of Insurance sent out multiple notices over the past several months reminding air ambulance providers of the deadline. During the most recent 2020 Wyoming Budget Session, no individuals or companies, including air ambulance companies, raised concerns with the law that would soon be coming into effect.

To be clear, the Wyoming Legislature has taken no actions to prevent residents from being able to participate in air ambulance membership programs. Companies that offer these programs are welcome and encouraged to continue offering their products. They need only comply with basic Wyoming Department of Insurance standards – straight forward consumer protections that every other company offering products in Wyoming follows.

One company has completed the necessary requirements in a timely fashion and is authorized to offer their plans to Wyoming citizens. Other companies are eligible to certify in the state at any time.

Air ambulance subscription services play an important role in keeping costs down when emergency air travel is required. At the same time, we as a legislature have a responsibility to ensure that Wyoming citizens are properly protected. In passing legislation in 2019, we were able to provide these protections for consumers while still ensuring important air ambulance cost savings programs could continue to be offered.

There is no question the life-saving flights being offered are vital to our healthcare system, and are being provided by skilled and dedicated professionals. In the coming weeks, I hope air ambulance companies will opt to step up to the plate and comply with state standards. The people of Wyoming value this service and deserve nothing less.