

Bike Medics Deliver Quicker Care at the Fair

By Mary Butler
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The perennially thick crowds at the Puyallup Fair have brought about the newest addition to the fair's internal emergency forces: bicycle medics.

Clad in bright yellow mesh shirts and black cargo shorts, Puyallup Fire Department medics are riding bikes to the rescue of sick or injured fairgoers caught in places where ambulances can't go.

The program, which the fire department tested at last year's fair, was adopted in 2000, making Puyallup's one of six bicycle medic programs statewide.

"Here at the fair, injuries are usually pretty minor, like somebody falling down and scraping a knee," said Pat Donovan, a Puyallup fire captain who oversees the program. "The bicycles allow us to get there quick and triage the situation. If somebody needs more help, then we let the other units keep coming."

For years, police departments have put officers on bikes to patrol urban areas because they can easily maneuver through crowds. The idea is the same for bicycle medic programs. The International Police Mountain Bike Association developed the training course.

Many of the fire department's emergency medical technicians and paramedics have taken the 32-hour course since Puyallup first looked into the program three years ago. The department is working to train every medic interested.

"We do a lot of slow-speed drills, weaving in between stuff," said Donovan, who is a trainer. "The handling of the bike is very important. Not only do they have to be careful not to hit anybody in their path, they've got to be careful not to hurt the bikes."

The department's two Klein bicycles – each costing about \$2000 – are equipped with 30 pounds of life-saving tools including a defibrillator, bee sting antidotes, and oxygen.

"There's probably another \$3000-\$4000 in equipment on the bikes," Donovan said.

Medics, some on bicycles, responded to about 300 incidents during last year's 17-day fair. Puyallup Fire also dispatches bicycle medics during the city's annual Meeker Days, a three-day street festival in June.

One drawback is that bikes can't transport people off the fairgrounds, Donovan said. The fire department deploys golf carts outfitted with stretchers to move patients.

The best part of the program, Donovan said, is the opportunity it affords to medics to meet people.

"We answer a lot of questions," he said. "And, for instance, if we see a child who's not wearing his bike helmet correctly or needs help changing a flat, we can help. It's a real public relations tool."