

TO THE rescue

Ambulance corps gets permanent HQ after 44 years

BY MARINA VILLENEUVE
marina.villeneuve@newsday.com

When Rossana Weitekamp was 12, a family member had a heart attack while working in Queens.

"It took an ambulance 45 minutes to arrive," Weitekamp, of Malverne, said. "Needless to say, he didn't make it."

Weitekamp, now 48 and a volunteer for Malverne's Volunteer Ambulance Corps, says ever since, she's always wanted to make sure others never have to wait so long for help.

At noon on Saturday, Malverne's volunteer corps is set to celebrate the opening of its first permanent headquarters, 11 Hempstead Ave., adjacent to the village's department of public works. Malverne's 44-year-

old corps, which answers about 450 calls per year, had been the only one in New York to lack a headquarters, officials said.

"We kept all the equipment at everyone's houses," president Joseph Karam, 37, said, shaking his head. "It was hard."

While one ambulance was kept at a village-owned garage, volunteers took turns storing the other ambulance, as well as cots and automatic defibrillators.

The project had been years in the making, said village Mayor Patty McDonald, 50.

"There were some road bumps," she said, noting that organizers had considered purchasing homes or renovating existing buildings. "This was the best option."

The 2,500-square-foot headquarters, designed by Loreto

Calcagnis Associates of Floral Park, cost an estimated \$800,000 to build, paid for by a bond bought by the village and \$150,000 raised by volunteers.

"We've been keeping in mind quality-of-life issues for people who live nearby," McDonald said. "The residents have been great, they understand how important this is



and how it's saved lives."

The corps began in 1968, when now-lifetime corps member Mary Ryan was, as a child, struck by a car and ended up waiting for a county ambulance for half an hour.

Residents who witnessed the incident vowed it should never happen again in their community, and the Malverne Volunteer Ambulance Corps was founded.

Membership had been declining over the years, dwindling to 30 to 35 members a few years ago, said Karam, who also volunteers as a firefighter. Though the headquarters was only recently unveiled, Karam said he's already noticed an increased interest in membership, which is now at 40 members.

"People come and go because there was no central place," Karam said. "We had membership meetings at the library, and now we have a small meeting room inside our headquarters." The building also includes an office, lounge, kitchen, shower, laundry and, of course, a garage for the corps' two ambulances.

Inspired by his father's service in the corps, Karam joined the now-defunct youth squad at the age of 14, with his sister, who still volunteers. "Once we get established here, hopefully we'll start up the youth squad for 14- to 17-year-olds," Karam said.

Phil Lorello, 29, said he's a recent member waiting for his EMS certification.

"Right now, I work for UPS and volunteer here as much as I can . . . Hopefully in time, I can be a great addition to the corps."



Shannon Orlik, 27, Joseph Karam, 37, Phil Lorello, 29, Andrew Pierides, 39, and Rossana Weitekamp, 48, all of Malverne, pose inside the Malverne volunteer ambulance. The volunteer corps will celebrate the opening of its new headquarters Saturday.