

# Calstar merger brings changes for members

By Susan Wood

Dan Gross of Roseville knows just how critical his Calstar air ambulance annual membership is when he recalls his snowmobiling adventure in April 2009.

Gross was riding around Highland Lakes in the Bear Valley area backcountry when he slipped off his sled, crashed and landed in a pile of rocks. Although injured, he was forced to drive the snowmobile for nearly 30 miles back to the Bear Valley fire station where Calstar picked him up. The math was against him – three people, three snowmobiles.

He could only drive it 10mph because of the pain.

“I didn’t break any bones, but I tore muscles in my lower abdomen. It was causing so much pain, I thought I was bleeding internally,” said the Bay Area former emergency medical technician, who did a mini assessment of himself at the time.

“It was pretty scary,” he told *Lake Tahoe News*.

It would have taken almost two hours to get him by ground to Sutter Hospital in Roseville.

Calstar, which awaits a finalized purchase in the coming weeks by Air Medical Group Holdings, got him there in 33 minutes.



Calstar pilot Heiko Kafton is enjoying the new helicopters that are more technologically advanced. Photo Copyright 2016 Carolyn E. Wright

His \$50 annual household membership for the air ambulance service picked up \$18,000 of the \$38,000 bill – with his Blue Cross health care plan absorbing the remaining \$20,000. It is not required for Calstar members to have insurance.

“I don’t know many people who could write a check for \$18,000 for an ambulance ride. I think everybody should be a member,” Gross said.

So when presented with the prospect of a different corporation owning Calstar, he carefully considered the impact of the parent company change.

“I don’t see it as a big deal,” he said, adding it appears the coverage area will be expanded through the West Plains, Mo., conglomerate.

The decade-old Air Medical Group provides access to more than 240 air ambulance locations across 32 states.

AirMed's for-profit organization, Reach Air Medical, served as a quasi competitor to Calstar in some areas. The merger means Calstar – which locally operates out of Lake Tahoe Airport – loses its nonprofit tax status and can't accept any donations.

Calstar members received a letter announcing the merger. Household membership is expected to rise to \$65 under the expansive AirMedCare Network.

The crew will remain intact on the operations side affecting pilots, mechanics and flight nurses.

"I believe that the acquisition by AMGH will actually be beneficial for Calstar as an organization in that we will now be part of a larger company focused on air medical transport and the resources that come with it," Tahoe's chief flight nurse Bryan Pond told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Layoffs will occur at Calstar's McClellan Park headquarters in Sacramento in mainly the development and outreach department. Director of Development and Outreach Mike Nichols is among the group receiving a pink slip.

"We don't need a satellite membership office. But overall, it's going to be better. Services will be more efficient and effective with Calstar and Reach as partners, not competitors," Nichols insisted. "We hear from folks that Calstar has made a difference in saving their life or making the recovery better."

Such is the case for Gross, who lives in the greater Sacramento area but often recreates in the Sierra Nevada Mountain Range.



Medical helicopters are like being on a flying hospital. Photo Copyright 2016 Carolyn E. Wright

Calstar also operates bases in Auburn, Ukiah, Gilroy, Concord, Salinas and Santa Maria. It's been stationed on the South Shore since October 2001. On any given day, the choppers can be seen flying over the lake, in and out of the wilderness as well as landing at Barton Memorial Hospital's helipad.

Each county operates under its own guidelines for emergency air medical transports. First responders determine if an air

ambulance is necessary.

In respect to specifically having an air ambulance membership at Lake Tahoe, Nichols mentioned that one might consider buying two club cards with Calstar and the Care Flight service – which operates out of the Truckee Airport and the Minden Airport and is based in Reno. That's because at this moment the merger does not include the reciprocal agreement with Care Flight.

The understanding between the two providers, which is not a formal contract, results in the two ambulance services picking up each other's patients when the other is busy.

Memberships for Care Flight – which also operates out of Chico, Boise and Spokane – run \$55 – which means having both could cost more than \$100.

Nonetheless, Nichols noted there's a good chance a comparable reciprocal agreement will be made with Care Flight before the buyout takes place. The companies are in negotiations.





The fleet was going to change even without the merger. Calstar now uses an Airbus H135/P3, with colors that make it look like its the Miami Dolphins charter helicopter. Photo Copyright 2016 Carolyn E. Wright

“There are a lot of unknowns,” Care Flight spokesman J.W. Hodge said.

For now, when one air ambulance service covering Lake Tahoe is not available, “we call on the next closest resources,” Hodge added.

In respect to the Calstar merger with Reach through the AirMedCare Network, Care Flight joins Calstar in wanting to make the change as seamless as possible, Hodge insisted.

That’s comforting to longtime active South Shore residents Paul and Lisa Huard.

“I’d still do it in a heartbeat,” Lisa Huard said of joining Calstar’s membership.

She recalled the time when her husband suffered from a heart condition in November 2012. He passed out and hit his chest on the granite tile.

“When he came to he didn’t know what was going on,” she said.

A crew took him to Barton where tests were run before a recommendation was made to transport him via air ambulance to Reno – a \$35,000 ride that took 20 minutes.

“In Paul’s case, he would have been fine (to transport by other means). But in other cases, every minute counts,” she said. “Calstar was so thorough. They told me what to expect, and I felt safer.”

Huard insisted she would pay more for membership.

“There shouldn’t be any question. Look, we pay \$10 for a Tylenol at the hospital – no problem,” she said.