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Post-Tribune

Elevators, escalators down at Metro Center

(<http://www.post-trib.com/news/lake/1527104.gmetro.article>)

April 15, 2009

By Jon Seidel

Post-Tribune staff writer

GARY -- The elevators and escalators in the Adam Benjamin Jr. Metro Center were shut down by a state inspector Tuesday and it wasn't clear how long officials will need to put them back in operation.

The station serves the South Shore Railroad and passenger buses.

Several violations were listed on reports provided by the Indiana Department of Homeland Security.

Problems with the telephones, fire extinguishers and excessive car noise were mentioned on the elevator reports, while missing screws and sharp edges were cited on the escalators.

"There were significant problems," Rachel Meyer, a spokeswoman for the state Department of Homeland Security, said.

Daryl Lampkins, general manager of the Gary Public Transportation Corp., said an elevator maintenance contractor was called out to the Metro Center in the afternoon to review the state's report.

GPTC is primarily responsible for maintaining the Metro Center, city officials said. A "Temporarily Out of Order" sign hung on the elevator Tuesday afternoon and yellow caution tape blocked access to the escalators.

Lampkins couldn't say how long it will take to fix the machinery, nor could he say how much it would cost. He said he was surprised the inspectors didn't give more time to correct the problems.

"It's very unusual," Lampkins said.

Contact Jon Seidel at 881-3148 or jseidel@post-trib.com. Comment on this story at www.post-trib.com.

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Indiana Aims to Control Statewide Fire Department Billings

April 16, 2009

An amendment inserted into Indiana House Bill 1447 would reduce the amount some citizens of that state would be billed by fire departments responding to emergencies.

The insurance industry trade association, Insurance Institute of Indiana, says the amendment would rein in what the group calls excessive over billing by Emergency Services Billing Corporation (ESBC), a company hired by fire departments to collect additional revenue for the departments.

The amendment would require fire departments to comply with the Indiana Fire Marshal's set fee schedule, which will lessen the amount of Hoosiers stuck with pricey bills for fire runs. Recently, Hoosiers have received bills ranging from a few thousands dollars to upwards of \$20,000 from ESBC, the trade association said.

Current Indiana law allows volunteer fire departments to charge fees for specified accidents and fire responses. In order to charge these fees, a volunteer fire department must comply with certain guidelines, such as publishing its fee schedule in a local news source, sending a bill within 30 days of the incident, and including a copy of the incident report with the charges. Most importantly, fire department charges must comply with the fee schedule that is published by the Indiana Fire Marshal.

However, many volunteer fire departments appear to be in violation of Indiana's current law. Volunteer fire departments in Indiana are contracting with ESBC to collect for fire runs. ESBC touts that the payment for services is typically covered by the insured's auto insurance policy, which many have found is untrue and are stuck with an expensive bill.

Bills that were typically less than \$500 in the past are now in excess of \$5,000 and do not comply with the Fire Marshal's fee schedule. Insurers have historically paid for volunteer fire department services, but coverage is typically limited to \$500. This leaves Hoosiers liable for the remainder of the bill. The insurance industry believes the charges are fraudulent and are defending their customers against attempts by ESBC to collect. However, those without insurance are left vulnerable.

In addition to excessive and unlawful charges, ESBC bills include hardball debt collection tactics indicating "any attempt to contact our client will be viewed as a circumvention of this relationship and may expose you/or your company to additional liability."

"Unfortunately, this vendor (ESBC), representing volunteer fire departments, is abusing the statute and using bullying tactics in an attempt to collect on these excessive fees," says Insurance Institute of Indiana President Steve Williams. "This bill (House Bill 1447) is designed to stop that and provide an important protection for Hoosiers."

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Hospitals put disaster training to work for bus crash

By Arthur Foulkes - The Tribune-Star

TERRE HAUTE April 15, 2009 04:12 pm

— Wabash Valley emergency responders took part last week in a disaster preparation exercise designed — among other things — to train hospital workers to handle a large influx of injured patients.

On Tuesday morning, two area hospitals put that training to the test after a school bus accident in northern Vigo County left nearly 30 people injured.

“We train for this,” said Lorrie Heber, a spokeswoman for Union Hospital Health Group. In such emergencies, hospitals are not just dealing with a large number of injured people, but also with concerned parents and others, she said.

Shortly after 9 a.m. Tuesday, a school bus from Parke County carrying more than 40 people, mostly fourth-graders from Turkey Run Elementary School, left the roadway and traveled through a ditch. The bus, which was taking the children on a field trip to the symphony in Terre Haute, nearly overturned before coming to rest back on the highway, witnesses said. Children and adults were tossed around inside the bus, but none was seriously injured.

In response to the accident, nearby Union Hospital and West Central Community Hospital in Clinton each initiated their “disaster plans,” said Rod Bosley, system director of safety and risk management for Union Hospital Health Group, which owns both health-care facilities.

Security staff were posted at the entrances of the hospitals as the injured began to arrive. The media were given updates via e-mail but were not allowed access to the injured or their families. “The staff [of both hospitals] handled it very well,” Bosley said. No additional staff had to be called in, he said.

More than 20 children on the bus were uninjured but still were taken to West Central Community Hospital until parents or guardians could pick them up, Heber noted. Those children were given cookies and milk in the hospital’s cafeteria. Around 12:30 p.m. the “all clear” was issued and the disaster plan was called off.

Although Union Hospital and West Central Community Hospital are owned by the same health group, all area hospitals work together to prepare for incidents like this, Bosley said. Last week’s disaster preparation exercise, which focused on earthquake response, included all hospitals in the Indiana Department of Homeland Security’s District 7.

“We have a pretty good working relationship with all of the hospitals in this part of the state,” Bosley said.

Dealing with a large influx of patients and concerned family members is “always kind of stressful” for hospital staff, Bosley said. But on Tuesday he thought everyone handled the situation well. “I was very pleased with the response” at both hospitals, he said.

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County eligible for federal aid

Times-Mail

April 13, 2009

State and federal officials today announced that Lawrence and six other counties are eligible for federal aid because of severe weather this winter.

The announcement was made by officials from the Indiana Department of Homeland Security (IDHS) and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Jennings, Lawrence, Ohio, Posey, Ripley and Scott counties are now eligible for federal help.

A press release issued this afternoon said, "Public Assistance (PA) funds for reimbursement or restoration are now available in 21 Hoosier counties as part of the presidential disaster declaration for a severe winter storm that occurred Jan. 26-28. These funds are for expenses or damage incurred by state or local government agencies and certain private non-profit organizations during the disaster. The assistance covers items such as debris removal, emergency protective measures, repair or replacement of roads, bridges, water control facilities, buildings, equipment, utilities, parks and other public infrastructure."

Assistance was previously made available to Clark, Crawford, Dubois, Floyd, Gibson, Harrison, Jackson, Jefferson, Orange, Perry, Spencer, Switzerland, Vanderburgh, Warrick and Washington counties.

"To apply," the release stated, "eligible agencies and organizations in the six newly-designated counties must first submit a Request for Public Assistance (RPA) to the State of Indiana by close of business May 6, 2009.

"State officials will schedule briefings to explain application procedures. Any agency or organization that may be eligible should contact their local emergency manager for more information.

"Private nonprofit organizations wishing to apply for Public Assistance must also complete an additional qualifying form to determine eligibility. Necessary forms can be found online at www.in.gov/dhs. Completed forms should be sent to cspencer@dhs.in.gov or faxed to FEMA/IDHS at 317-578-2447.

"PA funds are made available on a cost sharing basis with FEMA paying 75 percent of eligible costs. The remaining 25 percent of costs are the responsibility of the state/local agency or eligible non-profit organization."

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