



The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry

Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



Freedom House Ambulance Service (1967 - 1975)

"Pioneering All Black EMS Service"



Freedom House Ambulance Service, was an all-black emergency medical service (EMS), founded in 1967, in Pittsburgh, PA. It provided medical services to the predominantly black American Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

During the 1960s, medical emergency transportation services were often provided by the police or the local funeral home. The same vehicle that picked up dead bodies would also be the one to respond to an emergency medical transportation call. The wait times for services were excessive but especially long in the segregated Hill District of Pittsburgh - if they arrived at all. Also, the service was transportation only, with little to no medical care, being performed until you reached the hospital. While there were private ambulances, they didn't respond to the segregated areas of the city, and they cost more than most people could afford. The need for better emergency services was only highlighted when in 1966, former mayor David L. Lawrence collapsed and suffered irreparable brain damage due to the delay in transportation and immediate medical care. Being deprived of life-saving oxygen for too long, the mayor died 17 days later, having never regained consciousness. His death was ascribed to the limited access of resuscitation tools.

Seeing a desperate need for not only emergency transportation but also preliminary medical care, the founders of the Freedom House Enterprises (James "Jim" McCoy and Phil Hallen) devised a plan. The Freedom House Enterprises was a new economic force that offered support to the local community. Freedom House was initially conceived to respond to the needs of Pittsburgh's black community who often times, couldn't rely on police and fire departments during an emergency. Their ground-breaking work became the basis for all paramedics training in the country. During the same time, Dr. Peter Safar - the father of CPR - and a University of Pittsburgh physician - was pioneering the use of cardiopulmonary resuscitation, emphasizing the importance of treating patients enroute to the hospital - and not just transporting them there. Dr. Safar wanted to teach laypeople to deliver care in emergency rooms on wheels.

In 1966, unemployment in the Hill District was 14% and hope was bleak. James "Jim" McCoy and Phil Hallen recruited men from the Hill District - some unemployed, some with troubled pasts, and some veterans from the Vietnam War. Dr. Safar and Jim McCoy designed the paramedics training, which included a 32-week 300-hour course on anatomy, physiology, CPR, advanced first aid, nursing, and defensive driving.

Freedom House paramedics were the first in the country to intubate a patient on the street, deliver an electric shock to a patient's heart in the field, and read an EKG while enroute to the hospital. They opened the training course up to all races and had an influx of white students learning side-by-side with the students from the Hill District. During their first year of operation, the Freedom House Ambulance Service responded to nearly 5,800 calls and transported more than 4,600 patients, primarily in African American neighborhoods in Pittsburgh.

However, despite its success - racism and power dynamics in Pittsburgh shut down the Freedom House Ambulance Co. in 1975. The new city mayor, Pete Flaherty, was angry that the poor people of the Hill District were getting better emergency care than those of the wealthier white neighborhoods. Flaherty started placing excessive scheduling demands on the Freedom House company and eventually cancelled their city contract. He then formed The City of Pittsburgh EMS with one of the white students from the Freedom House training program, Glynn Cannon, heading the new service. The Freedom House Ambulance Service took its last call on October 15, 1975. Most of the original black EMS paramedics were systematically removed and multiple lawsuits followed, alleging the new EMS service refused to transport black patients or respond to calls in black neighborhoods.

John Moon, an original Freedom House Paramedic, later became the Assistant Chief of the City of Pittsburgh EMS. While he was in charge of recruiting, he hired and mentored Amara Gilchrist, a young black woman who aspired to work for the city as an EMS. In 2019, John proudly stood nearby as Amara Gilchrist was sworn in as Deputy Chief of the Pittsburgh Bureau of Emergency Medical Services - the First black person and first woman to hold that position. In 2023, Amara was promoted to Chief of Pittsburgh EMS. The Freedom House Ambulance: First Responders documentary is on PBS.

