

# Digitech Goes Live in Four Weeks at Gwinnett Fire and EMS



*Creating efficiency through planning and execution  
Implementation study January 1, 2012*

## **Rapid expansion means increased call for services**

Gwinnett County, a suburban community of the Metro Atlanta area, is located approximately 20 miles north of the city and has a population of 851,000. In the last decade, the area has seen rapid population expansion accompanied by increased demand for services. The Gwinnett County Department of Fire and Emergency Services, formed in 1997, has since expanded from 18 service stations to 30, and the current 15-year Strategic Plan calls for the addition of five more. Maintaining a dependable revenue source to meet the Department's rising operating costs became imperative.

## **Gwinnett issues call for proposals**

By 2011, Gwinnett County had identified medical transport billing as a revenue source that might benefit from improved efficiencies. The Department was already using ESO Solutions ePCR software on Panasonic Tough Books to generate electronic patient care reports from the field, which had brought improvements to the accuracy and completeness of their field data collection. Gwinnett was also using a bank lockbox for direct deposit of remittances to streamline the posting of receipts. Now the need was to speed up submissions - to be able to pull the data from the field reports, review claims and add information if necessary, submit claims to third party providers and receive remittances, all within a shorter time cycle. After extensive research into best practices and in-service solutions deployed at similar departments around the region and nationally, Gwinnett County assembled and issued

### **About Gwinnett Fire & EMS**

Gwinnett County Fire and Emergency Services provides fire protection and emergency medical services for a population of about 800,000 people with a force of 845 superbly trained men and women who are proactive and citizen-oriented. Responding to 64,450 calls for help annually (5,276 total fire calls, 46,993 total EMS calls, including 33,506 medical transports, and 12,181 other calls). GCFES operated 30 strategically placed fire stations that include 30 engine companies, 10 ladder trucks, and 23 advanced life-support medical units.

In addition to providing basic fire and emergency services, trained teams are in place for technical rescue, hazardous materials, and swift-water rescue situations. The department's own Fire Academy provides training far beyond state requirements and all firefighters receive further emergency medical care throughout their career at GCFES. All emergency response vehicles are staffed with EMTs and paramedics and carry essential medical equipment for advanced life support.

Gwinnett Fire and Emergency Services strongly supports efforts to prepare citizens for fire, medical emergencies, technological, and natural disasters. The Community Risk Reduction Section (Fire Marshal's Office) reviews building plans to address potential fire issues and inspects fire protection systems in buildings. In addition, GCFES' community education programs offer many fire and life safety education programs at no cost.

RFP 014-11 for Emergency Medical Patient Billing Services on an Annual Contract on May 26, 2011. The opportunity was right in the sweet spot for Digitech, who excels in creating process efficiencies for medical transport billing. Digitech knew they would submit a proposal.

### **Digitech sees opportunity**

“The contract was something we really wanted to pursue as the County is considered a trend setter in the region,” reported Marty McNellis, Director of Business Development for Digitech. “We felt our robust reporting capability would be well received by the Gwinnett Fire Rescue, who were hungry for data and able to make good use of it. We knew that if we could sign Gwinnett, it could result in Digitech having a very happy, high profile client in a major metropolitan region.”

Digitech’s Ambulance Commander, the proprietary software platform which McNellis describes as “the heart and soul of Digitech’s ability to file claims” has been 25 years in development. “It’s already been integrated with all of the major ePCR applications,” said McNellis, “and has numerous customizable features that enable the Digitech development team to adapt it easily to the particular requirements of any implementation project.” Most importantly, Ambulance Commander’s track record is very solid, and has proven to increase collections with a high degree of success.

### **Implementation begins**

The contract was signed on November 29th, 2011 and systems integration began immediately. “This was a fairly smooth transition,” commented Walt Pickett, Digitech’s Senior VP Development and support. “We had a great team to work with on their side – very well organized.” However, Digitech’s implementation

was required to meet the benchmarks of the contract, one of which was a January 1 start date. Fortunately, because Digitech had already implemented an interface between the ESO Solutions ePCR software and Ambulance Commander, the deployment team was able to shortcut that piece of integration. The Gwinnett implementation of Ambulance Commander was made operational within four weeks, ready for the “go live” date planned for end of December. At the same time, Digitech account managers were preparing enrollments with third party insurance carriers such as Medicare and Med-



icaid at the same time they were gathering authorizations for the electronic transfer of remittances. *“The credentialing process requires several steps,”* reported Mary DelFranco, Digitech’s Senior Account Manager. *“By posting payment in this way, it becomes much more efficient compared to keying data in manually.”*

Also within this four week period, Joyce Kerulo, Digitech’s Senior VP for Billing Services, and her staff were getting prepared by setting up an organizational structure to handle the account. *“One of our strengths is that we are able to process quickly,”* she said, *“usually within one business day of receiving claims.”* Donna Buhler, CPA and Business Manager for the Gwinnett County Fire and Emergency Services Department, agrees. *“Joyce always responded immediately to any of our change orders,”* she stated. *“She and the Digitech Billing team were always very thorough in everything they did.”* As the first ESO ePCR reports were being received from Gwinnett County during the last week in December,

### Going Forward

Three years further on, the relationship between Digitech and Gwinnett County remains solid. Joyce Kerulo from Digitech and Donna Buhler from Gwinnett continue to maintain close contact to resolve issues related to claims submissions and look for process improvements. For instance, Digitech can flag aberrations such as mileage claims that look out of line or claims for patients who are deceased. Or, in the case of incarcerated patients, Digitech developed a template for report submissions. The percentage of denied claims remains “very small,” and if a claim is denied, Digitech’s billing staff will look for the next source of payment. According to Ms. Kerulo, all remittances continue to be received within a window of 14 to 60 days. And, Reporting around predictable monthly revenue totals enables Gwinnett County to better plan for the future of the Department.

“It’s been great,” Chief Holder says. “We’ve seen revenue a lot faster and it’s been very consistent. Digitech shows timeliness in filing and continues to demonstrate how quickly they can process.”

Digittech staff began verifying third party insurance information using Digitech’s proprietary search process, called Sleuth™. Trained coders looked for the compliance issues to ensure third party insurers were being billed for the correct level of service. The first submissions were made to Medicare and Medicaid on January 6th, 2012. Within a window of some 14 days, Gwinnett County began to see remittances deposited into their lockbox account. Michael Mannion, Digitech’s Director of Finance, reported that average monthly receipts between March and August 2012 totaled \$1.3 million. 17% of that total was achieved during the first month of operation - January, 2012, and 77% during the second month. By the third month - March, 2012, Gwinnett County was receiving 100% of the \$1.3 million average total and has maintained that amount in monthly remittances ever since.

### Digittech follows through

*“They (Digitech) exceeded our expectations in the way they were able to implement,”* said Department Chief Mitch Holder, Battalion Chief, Business Services. *“Any time we addressed an issue they were very proactive in delivering solutions, usually within 24 to 48 hours.”*

Once Digitech had demonstrated it could continue to deliver services as specified in the contract over a significant stretch of time, it was a good moment to cement the relationship with a face-to-face meeting that could help the County to take their reporting, their processes, and their planning to new levels.

With that in mind, Walt Pickett, Joyce Kerulo, and Melissa Shuster, Dlgitech's Compliance Officer, visited Gwinnett County on January 18th and 19th, 2012. Ms. Shuster said that since the basic processes were set up and functioning satisfactorily, Walt was able to introduce the Gwinnett County team to additional capabilities of the Ambulance Commander platform that would enable them to better understand their patient population and project future needs while she helped guide Gwinnett Fire in the development of a compliance plan. Ms. Shuster prepared a presentation that outlined HIPAA (The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996) requirements in developing a compliance plan, pointed to sources of information, and made recommendations to the County. *"It's the right thing to do,"* she added. *"A compliance plan ensures that your billing is being conducted properly, with appropriate safeguards to protect patient privacy and keep information secure."* While in Gwinnett County, the Dlgitech team visited the Department's dispatch area for a hands-on look at how Gwinnett Fire and EMS handles their 30,000 medical transport dispatches each year. And finally, both teams visited the billing and IT departments of the two receiving hospitals in the area, Gwinnett County Medical Center and East Side Medical Center. Such relationship-building has worked to secure access to patient information in cases where the record is incomplete.

*"The transparency of Ambulance Commander's reporting systems allows us to troubleshoot on any issue and about anything,"* Chief Holder now says, commenting on the software. *"The dashboard is a useful tool. We use it to create financial reports, or to research the age demographics of our patients, or to identify insurance carriers. We've seen a change both in the type of patient we transport and an increase in the number of transports. The software enables us to project future needs and build that into our budget process."*

Donna Buhler agrees. *"The reporting capabilities are extensive and accessible,"* she says. *"I can pull up any information that I need or drill down to any detail of any individual transport. My monthly reconciliation process is much less of a challenge and goes more smoothly."*