

# Motorcycle paramedics have a need for speed

By Sallie James, South Florida Sun-Sentinel, 2/17

FORT LAUDERDALE - Ken DeSantis looks like a traffic cop whizzing down Interstate 595 on his Harley-Davidson Road King. But DeSantis doesn't write tickets, and he only targets speeders if they're hurt.

Instead of handcuffs and citation books, the 22-year veteran firefighter/paramedic packs medication and bandages for saving lives. DeSantis, 42, of Wellington, is a motormedic whose mission is to get to crashes fast — even faster than your typical ambulance.

"People think we're cops until we bring out all the gear and start asking medical questions," chuckled DeSantis, part of a new, two-person motorcycle rescue team stationed at Port Everglades to reduce response times at the congested seaport. The Broward Sheriff Fire Rescue division started the pilot program six months ago, modeling it after a successful one created by Miami-Dade Fire Rescue.

"We cut response times to life-threatening calls by more than 58 percent," said Miami-Dade Fire Rescue Capt. Roman Bas, who started his agency's team in 2002 and hopes to help train Broward team members. "We have an average of a three-minute response time. You look at the statistics and it definitely works."

Using 10 donated motorcycles formerly used by the California Highway Patrol, Bas created his team. Today, rescue workers staff the motorcycles five days a week, 12 hours a day.

"We would love to see this program implemented around the country," Bas said. "We are pleased to see our neighboring fire department in Broward starting their own."

At Port Everglades, the motormedics roll on everything from traffic crashes to stalled elevators. "There's lots of cruise ship traffic; there are traffic issues and [the port is] close to Interstate 95," said Mike Jachles, agency spokesman. "They can be anywhere quickly because it's centrally located."

DeSantis and firefighter/paramedic Tim Riggs were selected for the job in Fort Lauderdale based on seniority and medical experience. Both had to complete the same 80-hour motorman course required of police. Key to the unit's value is the riders' ability to weave through gridlock and arrive at crash scenes well before their co-workers pull up with a fully-equipped rescue truck. Daily crowds at the five-square-mile port often reach 46,000, but the maneuverability and speed of the motorcyclists make it easy to navigate. On busy days, they sometimes run as many as 15 calls, DeSantis said.

"On the average, [there's] at least a two- to three-minute decrease in response times," DeSantis said. "Traffic in the port is so congested that the rescues cannot get in ... they have a good eight- to 10-minute delay with taxis and 18-wheelers, and the bike is able to weave in and out."

The paramedics can stabilize injured patients, check sounding alarms or begin evacuating people from a burning ship when they arrive at a scene. If the call is a working fire, they can change into traditional bunker gear and battle the blaze with their co-workers once the firefighting apparatus arrives.

"It's not to take the place of a rescue, but to supplement it," said Broward Sheriff Fire Rescue Lt. Tom Lord.