



# SANFORD AMBULANCE VITAL SIGNS

Winter 2025

Compassion, Excellence and Community

## Remembering Char Skaff

By Sherm Syverson

Sanford Ambulance, formerly F-M Ambulance, has provided EMS services to the Fargo-Moorhead-West Fargo metro area since 1959. The ambulance service functioned as a basic life support (BLS) ambulance service for the first 23 years of operations. In 1981, the ambulance service set course to obtain advanced life support (ALS) designation. ALS level of care required training some of their approximately 25 EMTs to become paramedics. In that first paramedic class of 1982 was an EMT named Charlene “Char” Skaff.

For nearly all of Char’s paramedic career at F-M Ambulance which began in 1978, she worked as a day-shift paramedic, which allowed her to teach EMT, CPR, first aid, and paramedic classes during evening hours. According to newspaper advertisements in the mid-80’s, Char was already coordinating and teaching for the F-M Ambulance Paramedic School by 1984, and her influence is felt within the walls of Sanford Health and Sanford Ambulance to this day. Nearly the entire Sanford Ambulance - Fargo leadership team from the supervisor level up, received training from Char. Many of Char’s students went on to become physicians. The late Dr. Heidi Lako-Adamson, Dr. Bud Belk, Dr. Mark Widstrom, Dr. Jim Rieber, and even the current Chief Medical Officer for Sanford Health - Fargo, Dr. Steve Briggs, sat in Char’s classroom. To state



Char Skaff was one of the founders of advanced life support (ALS) care for Sanford Ambulance and the entire state of North Dakota, is not an exaggeration. Moreover, being one of the first female paramedics in North Dakota, she led the way for other women of the time to make their way through the male-dominated field. Today, there is an even balance of women and men among the 125 EMTs and paramedics working in Fargo.

Char was born November 22, 1950, in Bismarck, ND. She grew up in Fargo-Moorhead and graduated from Concordia College with a degree in Elementary Education. (I used to joke with Char that teaching EMTs and paramedics was very similar to working with over-exuberant grade school children!) She later attended graduate school, obtaining a Master’s Degree in Health Services Management. Char’s reach extended past her ND and MN roots. She served on the National Registry of EMT’s Board of Directors and received a Presidential Leadership Award from the National Association of EMT’s. She was president of the ND EMS Association and help found the EMS Instructor/Coordinator Society in North Dakota and served as a National Registry Representative as a Paramedic examiner nationwide. Char was an avid volunteer for the American Heart Association, chaired the Operation Heartbeat Program for the Fargo-Moorhead area and served as Chairperson for the initial “Go RED for Women” campaign. After 30 years as a licensed paramedic, she became a Realtor for Coldwell Banker and retired in 2023. We will miss her, but we were blessed to have her in our lives. EMT and paramedic students of the future won’t be able to meet Char in-person, but her vision and dedication to help establish the Emergency Medical Education Center at Sanford Ambulance will continue to impact them and more importantly, help them save lives; just like Char did.

# Community Members Get an Inside Look at EMS

Several local residents spent their Thursday evenings this fall participating in the Citizens EMS Academy at Sanford Ambulance. The academy is a unique, interactive, hands-on opportunity for community members to learn what paramedics and EMTs do every day and to better understand the demands of the EMS profession.

Over the course of seven weeks, participants explored how to recognize and respond to medical and traumatic emergencies, along with what to do before an ambulance arrives. They practiced essential life-saving skills and gained a deeper appreciation for the fast-paced, highly skilled work that EMS teams perform. Each participant also had the chance to ride along with an ambulance crew, experiencing firsthand what a typical shift looks like.



The fall academy ran from September through October. For more information on future academies, please contact Kristi at [Kristi.Engelstad@SanfordHealth.org](mailto:Kristi.Engelstad@SanfordHealth.org) or 701-364-1759. The next Citizens EMS Academy is scheduled for fall 2026.

## Dr. Van Valkenburg Receives Physician of the Year Award

Dr. Jason Van Valkenburg was honored as the Sanford Physician of the Year at a ceremony in November. This award recognizes a physician who exemplifies the core values of Sanford Hospital through their daily work and interactions. In his nomination, Dr. Van Valkenburg was described as, "the embodiment of Sanford's mission, vision, and values."

An emergency physician in Fargo for the past eleven years, Dr. Van Valkenburg has shown exceptional commitment to expanding and supporting emergency care in rural communities. He serves as medical director not only for Sanford Ambulance in Fargo, but also for teams in Thief River Falls, Hillsboro, and Bagley. His leadership extends further as he provides medical direction for Barnesville Ambulance, first responder groups across Cass and Clay counties, and fire departments in Fargo, West Fargo, and Moorhead.



In July 2025, Dr. Van Valkenburg helped lead a major advancement in prehospital care by collaborating with multiple departments to launch a cutting-edge protocol enabling Sanford Ambulance - Fargo to administer whole blood in the field. Remarkably, within 48 hours of implementation, a trauma patient benefited from this lifesaving therapy.

Beyond his clinical and leadership contributions, Dr. Van Valkenburg is known for his humility. Colleagues describe him as one of the most modest physicians you'll meet - quick to credit others, open about what he still hopes to learn, and dedicated to mentoring through servant leadership.

## Lonski Receives Scouting Award

Kathy Lonski, Sanford Ambulance Clinical Improvement Advisor, was awarded the SSgt Andrew P Nelson Award for Outstanding Leadership and Service, which honors individuals who demonstrate exceptional leadership, service and dedication to others, in addition to commitment to their community. The Northern Lights Council of Scouting America presented the award at its Hometown Heroes Gala in November.

Kathy has been a paramedic at Sanford Ambulance since 1997. For the past 28 years, Kathy has been an integral and steadfast member of the Sanford Ambulance team, demonstrating exceptional leadership, dedication, and compassion in every role she has held. From her time leading ambulance crews in the field to her current position as an Improvement Advisor, Kathy has continually worked to enhance the quality of care, the well-being of her colleagues, and the overall excellence of the service.

"Kathy inspires others through her consistent integrity, commitment, and compassion," says Rick Cameron, Director of Operations at Sanford Ambulance. "Kathy's service to others, whether at work, at home, or in the community, reflects a level of dedication truly worthy of this recognition. We are honored to celebrate her achievements and grateful to have Kathy on our team." Kathy's influence reaches far beyond her daily responsibilities, serving as a mentor to new providers and a trusted resource for seasoned staff. Her unwavering dedication continues to strengthen Sanford Ambulance and the broader EMS community, making a lasting impact on those she serves.



## Did You Know...

Many EMS agencies incorporate the Star of Life into their organizational logo. Each of the six bars symbolizes a key function of emergency medical services: detection, reporting, response, on-scene care, care in transit and transfer to definitive care. At the center of the emblem is the serpent and staff, drawn from the staff of Asclepius, an ancient Greek physician honored as the god of medicine. The staff represents healing and medical practice, while the serpent, known for shedding its skin, symbolizes renewal. Together, these elements make the Star of Life a universal symbol of emergency medical care recognized around the world.



## We're Hiring!!

*Are you an EMT or paramedic who is interested in working in a fun, fast-paced atmosphere? Sanford Ambulance is hiring!*

*Check out [sanfordhealth.jobs](https://sanfordhealth.jobs) to see what positions we have available! We'd love to have you join our team!*





# Winter Skills Fair

Each quarter, Sanford Ambulance EMTs and paramedics participate in skills fairs. These fairs are an essential part of ongoing education for EMS providers. These sessions not only help maintain skills proficiency, they also help sharpen critical thinking skills, refresh low-frequency skills, and introduce staff to new equipment and best practices. Skills fairs also create valuable opportunities for crews to work together as a team, strengthening areas such as situational awareness, patient assessment skills, and communication.

Instructors at quarterly skills fairs use the controlled training environment to offer supportive, constructive feedback - not to critique performance, but to build confidence. Skills fairs are focused on reinforcing rarely used skills, improving decision-making skills, and preparing crews for calls that require quick, decisive action.

The winter 2025 skills fair focused on five topics:

- **Interosseous (IO) access** - interosseous vascular access involves the insertion of a specialized hollow-bore needle through the bone cortex into the medullary space. This is used for critical patients, when quick vascular access is necessary to save the patient's life.
- **Vector change defibrillation** - a technique in which defibrillator pads are repositioned to create a new electrical pathway through the heart when initial shocks from traditional placement fail to convert an arrhythmia.
- **Double sequential external defibrillation** (also referred to as dual sequential external defibrillation) - a resuscitation technique in which two defibrillators deliver shocks in rapid succession to treat refractory ventricular fibrillation when standard defibrillation has failed.
- **HOTT traumatic arrest reminder** - review and reminder that rapid, targeted interventions for the four reversible causes of traumatic arrest (hypovolemia, oxygenation, tension pneumothorax, and tamponade) can increase the chance of successful resuscitation.
- **Hyperkalemic cardiac arrest** - a hyperkalemic cardiac arrest occurs when dangerously high potassium levels disrupt the heart's electrical activity.

Topics for Sanford Ambulance skills fairs are determined through a QA process during run review, crew member questions, or suggestions. EMS skills fairs are designed with one goal in mind: helping providers become more confident, competent, and prepared to deliver exceptional patient care to our community when it matters most. They ensure crews stay ready for both everyday calls and rare, high-acuity situations that demand rapid, precise action.



# HEALTH HIGHLIGHT

## Recognizing Strokes: FAST

Time is critical when it comes to stroke. The faster a stroke is recognized and treated, the better the chances of reducing long-term disability or even saving a life. That's why knowing the early warning signs is so important - and why EMS activation should happen immediately.

**The FAST acronym is an easy way to remember the most common stroke symptoms:**

- **F** – Face: Does one side of the face droop when smiling?
- **A** – Arms: Is one arm weak or numb when raising both arms?
- **S** – Speech: Is speech slurred, strange, or difficult to understand?
- **T** – Time: If any of these signs are present, call 911 immediately. Every minute counts.

The FAST signs are the quickest way for bystanders to identify a potential stroke and act fast, but other symptoms may include sudden confusion, trouble seeing, dizziness, or severe headache.

Calling 911 immediately ensures EMS can respond quickly, begin life-saving care, and alert the hospital so treatment can start without delay. **Remember:** stroke care is time-sensitive, and early recognition saves lives.



**FACE**

Ask the patient to smile. Is one side of the face drooping?



**ARMS**

Ask the person to raise their arms. Is one arm weak?



**SPEECH**

Ask the person to speak. Is their speech slurred?



**TIME**

Call 911 right away at the first sign of a stroke.

It is important to realize that strokes can happen to anyone at any time, and the sooner treatment begins, the better the outcome. Even if symptoms seem mild or go away, calling 911 immediately is critical—EMS can quickly assess the situation, start life-saving interventions, and ensure the patient reaches a hospital equipped to provide urgent stroke care. Spreading awareness of FAST can help friends, family, and coworkers recognize a stroke early and act without hesitation. By learning the signs and responding quickly, you could make a life-changing difference for someone experiencing a stroke.

Staying prepared is just as important as knowing the signs. Take time to talk with your family, coworkers, and friends about stroke symptoms and what to do in an emergency. Consider posting the FAST acronym in common areas at home or work as a quick reminder. Simple steps like these help build a community that's ready to respond, ensuring more people get the rapid care they need when seconds matter most. By raising awareness and encouraging others to learn the signs, we can strengthen our entire community's response to stroke. Together, these efforts can lead to faster recognition, quicker access to care, and better outcomes for those affected.

# 2025 American Heart Association Guideline Changes

The American Heart Association (AHA) released its 2025 updates to CPR and emergency cardiovascular care guidelines, bringing important changes for EMS providers, first responders, and community members. We have highlighted some of the changes and updates below.

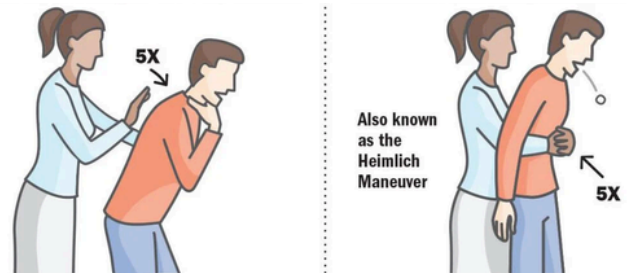
## Universal Chain of Survival:

- The new guidelines emphasize a single “Chain of Survival” that applies to all cardiac arrests - adult, pediatric, in-hospital, or out-of-hospital. Early recognition, high-quality CPR, and rapid defibrillation remain key to improving survival and neurological outcomes.



## Updated Choking Response:

- For conscious adults and children, the recommended approach is now 5 back blows followed by 5 abdominal thrusts, repeated until the airway is cleared or the person becomes unresponsive. For infants, use 5 back blows alternating with 5 chest thrusts - the previous two-finger technique is no longer recommended.



## Opioid-Related Emergencies:

- The guidelines include new recommendations for suspected opioid overdoses, highlighting the use of naloxone alongside standard resuscitation measures. For both trained and lay rescuers, giving an opioid antagonist (such as naloxone) may be appropriate for adults and children in cardiac arrest when an opioid overdose is suspected, as long as it does not delay or interfere with standard resuscitation efforts, including high-quality CPR with breaths. Administering naloxone quickly can help reverse the effects of the overdose and improve the patient's chances of survival.



## What this means for community members:

Immediate, hands-only CPR is critical for anyone experiencing cardiac arrest because every minute without chest compressions reduces the chance of survival. High-quality chest compressions keep blood flowing to the brain and heart until professional help arrives, significantly improving outcomes. The 2025 AHA updates emphasize that bystanders, even without formal training, can make a life-saving difference by starting compressions right away. During your next CPR class, you'll receive hands-on instruction on these updated techniques, including the universal chain of survival, proper compression depth and rate, and how to integrate the latest guidance on opioid overdoses and choking. This training ensures that both trained rescuers and everyday community members are ready to act confidently when seconds count.

## Save a Life Saturday

Join us on Saturday, February 14, for Save a Life Saturday at West Acres! This is your chance to learn lifesaving skills like hands-only CPR, stopping a bleed, and using an AED. Hosted by Sanford Ambulance, the NDSCS EMS Club, and other local organizations, this event is a fun, fast way to learn how to save a life. Whether you're a first-time learner or just brushing up on your skills, your participation could make a difference in our community.





## EMS Education

The Sanford Health EMS Education team is dedicated to supporting both new and experienced EMS professionals through high-quality training, hands-on learning, and ongoing skill development, while also providing essential CPR and first aid education to the community. Focused on strengthening clinical knowledge and building confidence in the field, the team delivers education that keeps the public and EMS providers prepared for emergencies.

### **SAMHSA Grant**

The Sanford Health EMS Education team has been awarded a grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). This grant will help recruit and train emergency medical services personnel across rural areas of Minnesota and North Dakota. SAMHSA recognizes the great need for emergency services in rural areas and the critical role EMS personnel serve across the country. As one of only 27 grant recipients in the nation, SHEMA is using the funds to provide a variety of educational programs to strengthen rural EMS agencies and providers. This program grant provides scholarships that cover the tuition and fees to earn an EMT certification for people in rural areas within Sanford's footprint. For more information, please call 701-364-1750.

### **Sanford Paramedic Apprenticeship**

Sanford Ambulance is now accepting applications for the next Sanford Paramedic Apprenticeship (SPA) program beginning in the Fall 2026 semester. Participants will work as EMTs within the ambulance service while also being paid to attend lectures, labs, and clinical experiences throughout their training. This unique opportunity allows candidates to gain hands-on experience while advancing their education toward becoming a paramedic. The program is designed for motivated individuals who are ready to take the next step in their EMS career while earning a steady income. Spots are limited, so early application is encouraged. For more information, please call 701-364-1750.



### **New Location!**

The Sanford Health EMS Education team is excited to begin a new chapter at the Amber Valley location, a space designed to better support their growing programs and training needs. The new facility offers expanded classrooms, updated simulation areas, and improved resources that enhance both provider and community education. With more room to collaborate and train, the team is poised to deliver an even higher level of EMS instruction. This move strengthens the SHEMA team's commitment to preparing EMS providers and the public with the skills needed to respond confidently in emergency situations.



## **Sanford Ambulance**

2215 18th Street South

Fargo, ND 58103