

St. J Firm Develops Mobile Hospital Units for Battlefield Use

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ST. JOHNSBURY – It takes two people about 10 minutes to roll it out, connect the air hose, press a button and watch the tent hospital self inflate. That's about all it takes to ready this rapidly deployable device to handle casualties, according to a Northeast Kingdom manufacturing company.

Congress recently awarded St. Johnsbury-based Mobile Medical International Corp. a \$4.6-million contract to continue developing the latest in battlefield hospital technology, according to Diane Montminy, senior manager of military affairs at the company. She said the company is also "in contract stage" of selling several units to another country she wouldn't name. In fact, the company has received about \$16 million from the U.S. Army and U.S. Congress since 1997, according founder Rick Cochran on Tuesday. Sens. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., and James Jeffords, I-Vt., helped the company obtain the contracts, he said.

Cochran, a Walden native, began developing shelters in the 1980s as a student at Brigham Young University in Utah and went on to found Mobile Medical in 1994, filling what he saw as a need for physicians to have accredited surgical facilities near their offices. The company has 27 workers at a manufacturing facility on Route 2 east of St. Johnsbury in the building that also houses Fairbanks Scales.

"We are the only company that has ever manufactured a unit that met state licensing requirements, Medicare certification and Joint Commission on Accreditation for Healthcare Organization requirements," Cochran said. "Nobody has ever done any one of those, never mind all three."

"The Army said 'we like it'," but asked for a smaller version in 1997.

Mobile Medical got funding to develop a smaller unit around 2001. The resulting "mobile single palette unit" is now being used at some hospitals and is to be shipped this summer to Army bases for testing and training, Montminy said.

Mobile Medical has worked with military users and design engineers to make a functional site for wartime conditions, including LED lights and a power generator. The system includes filtered air, lighting and temperature control, and fits on a trailer. A palette is 108 inches by 88 inches. The unit can be up 10 minutes after arrival at the site, and cots or a command unit can go inside immediately, Montminy said. Once up, the 5,000-pound shelter provides 400 square feet of protective space. The positive-pressure air system provides protection against nuclear, biological and chemical contamination.

"What we are providing is meeting a U.S. military requirement to be 100 percent mobile," Montminy said during a video shoot last week in a large sand pit outside St. Johnsbury to simulate desert conditions.

"This is exciting stuff," said James Valastro, a South Burlington videographer. He was hired to make a "how-to" training video aimed at military personnel. "It is amazing to see something the size of a horse trailer roll out into a whole building in 12 minutes."

The unit can hold 10 hospital beds or become an emergency headquarters in the time it takes to eat a hamburger. It can be transported by helicopter, pickup truck or Hummer for use in war zones or at natural catastrophes, such as hurricanes, the company says. Potential customers include hospitals needing temporary space while their own facilities undergo renovations and the U.S. military.

Cochran said he believes his shelter should be available to every fire department in the country to prepare for medical emergencies. Each one costs about \$325,000 fully loaded with air protection and other elements to work in adverse conditions.

Cochran said the state of Vermont gets a lot of Homeland Security dollars. The United States has spent "a gazillion" dollars on technology since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and "still we are having a hard time communicating," Cochran said, adding the same is true for medical preparedness.

"We are saying, 'Come on, Vermont, let's be an example'," Cochran said with enthusiasm. "We are the leader in this whole technology of all U.S. major contractors Mobile Medical received the first contract to do the requirements and definition of the next generation field hospital with the U.S. Army. This is the new national hospital of the future."