INTRODUCTION

Freedom House Ambulance Service was established in Pittsburgh in 1967 as a collaboration between Freedom House Enterprises and Presbyterian-University Hospital. It primarily serviced Oakland, the Hill District, and Downtown, and was largely staffed by African-Americans from the Hill District. In its eight years of operation, Freedom House became a pioneer in emergency medical services (EMS) and made Pittsburgh a center for emergency care.

Research Purpose

- Foster appreciation for a minority organization forgotten by its respective field
- Establish the service’s impact on the design of paramedic curriculum
- Highlight the organization’s importance to the African-American community

RESEARCH SOURCES

Peter Safar Papers: University of Pittsburgh Special Collections
Freedom House Ambulance Records: Heinz History Center Archives

SERVICE ORIGINS: A THREE-FOLD PURPOSE

- Provide meaningful employment for the African-American Community
- Provide the African-American community with access to emergency services
- Test new training initiatives for EMS providers to decrease mortality in the out-of-hospital setting

POINEERING PARAMEDIC CURRICULUM

- Oct 1967: The first class of trainees embarks on a 12-month training program that becomes one of the first to train to an EMT level
- Pilot training programs for paramedic level curriculum begins
- 1968-1975: Freedom House training curriculum is continually refined based on trainee success and feedback
- Employees are functioning as some of the nation’s first paramedics by April 1975
- Jul 1975: Freedom House medical director Dr. Nancy Caroline wins a grant from the government to create a national standard paramedic curriculum, which she bases on the Freedom House training curriculum
- Oct 1975: Freedom House Ambulance Service ceases operations due to financial troubles
- 2016: Paramedic textbooks and clinical training programs are founded on the same knowledge base established by Dr. Caroline’s national standard curriculum

Visual representation of the pathophysiology of atrial fibrillation from Dr. Caroline’s curriculum (top) and a 2016 paramedic textbook (bottom). Modern paramedic textbooks still utilize graphic aids created by Dr. Caroline to help Freedom House trainees learn, which she later placed in her own textbook.

“...when I go into some of the poor, black neighborhoods, the kids gather around and talk to me. They are impressed to see a black man like myself in a responsible position. Their attitude is ‘gosh if he made it, maybe I can’. This is the kind of support I’ve gotten over the years.”

- Daniel Thomas, Freedom House Employee

Freedom House employees with the medical leadership from Presbyterian-University Hospital.
Many employees were considered “unemployable blacks” before being recruited to train. After being hired by the city EMS when Freedom House closed, racial tensions caused most to find healthcare jobs elsewhere while others returned to the streets, unemployed once again.

“If you’re going to work in the inner city, you have to be a real fighter, and that’s what she was.”