



## **Interview with Annette Banks, Producer | Freedom House Ambulance Background Reading**

Before the 1960s, most residents of Pittsburgh depended on police officers, firefighters, or funeral homes to provide emergency medical services, but even these services were limited, especially for African Americans.

By the mid-1960s an estimated 1200 preventable deaths occurred each year during emergency transport in Allegheny County. And due to intense racism and imbalanced power dynamics in the city, the medical needs of the African American community in Pittsburgh were often dismissed, with emergency response calls going unanswered.

Freedom House Enterprises, established by NAACP member James McCoy, was built in response to a growing need for services for Pittsburgh's underserved African American community. The organization provided food delivery and job training services, but one big need still prevailed – medical services. Freedom House Ambulance was formed to address this need for medical care.

In partnership with McCoy, Phil Hallen and physician-researcher Peter Safar (known as the father of CPR) built the first Freedom House Ambulance team. They hired 24 men and women from the Hill District neighborhood of Pittsburgh as paramedics and offered 300 hours of training in anatomy, physiology, and resuscitation, providing experience in operating rooms, emergency rooms, and morgues with 9 months on the field.

The organization answered its first call in June of 1968 and achieved its first success – saving a woman's life. In its first year, Freedom House Ambulance answered 6,000 calls and saved 200 lives. The organization brought a sense of pride and dignity to the community and the organization extended its service beyond the Hill District to Downtown Pittsburgh and Oakland. By 1970, Freedom House ambulances were answering an average of 18 calls per day.

Over time, police officers in the city found themselves depending on Freedom House ambulances for personal emergencies and calls extended beyond their designated district. Freedom House systems were replicated all over the U.S. and world, including Los Angeles, California, and Germany, and by the 1970s, under the leadership of Nancy Caroline, the Freedom House Ambulance team established the first nationally recognized paramedic training program, which is still in use today.

Despite their success, the organization encountered several challenges. Financial and grant opportunities were limited due to the racial background of the team, and the politics of Pittsburgh presented an additional hurdle for the organization. Mayor Flaherty and other city leaders at the time prevented continued growth of the organization, canceling the contract with Freedom House Enterprises, adopting the program they put in place, and turning over their work to the city. Their last call was taken October 15, 1975.

Today, the legacy of Freedom House continues to inspire and influence generations of EMTs around the country and world.