Air Methods Corporation announced last week they are moving the Air Idaho helicopter rescue base from Idaho Falls to Driggs at the end of February 2015.

In conjunction with Eastern Idaho Regional Medical Center (EIRMC) and Teton Valley Health Care the Air Idaho Rescue program’s new base at the Driggs-Reed Memorial Airport will help reduce the time it takes to transport a patient to a tertiary care facility, a press release from Air Methods said.

Judson Smith, business manager of Air Idaho said traditionally and historically the helicopter was always flying east from Idaho Falls toward the mountains. The helicopter was rarely used in the Idaho Falls area because it is often faster to respond by ambulance.

“We are always looking for ways to better service our communities and we saw an increased need for critical care air medicine in the region,” Smith said.

The 2014 Idaho Legislature approved and funded a plan to develop a statewide Time Sensitive Emergency system of care that will include three of the top five causes of deaths in Idaho: trauma, stroke and heart attack. Studies show that organized systems of care improve patient outcomes, reduce the frequency of preventable death and improve the quality of life of the patient. Moving the helicopter base to Driggs will help reduce the time it takes to get patients to a critical care facility faster.
The Air Idaho Rescue base will be staffed with 14 personnel, including flight nurses, flight paramedics, pilots and mechanics, and is in service 24 hours per day and seven days a week.

“Suffice it to say the City of Driggs is pleased that Air Idaho has chosen to locate their base here,” said Driggs Mayor Hyrum Johnson. “This acknowledges what we who live here already know, namely that Driggs is a great place to live and work. The life-saving service and economic benefit of 14 new employees in town are welcome additions.”

Smith said the Air Idaho staff would not change to new employees. He said some of the staff was already based in Teton Valley while others would commute. The staff works in shifts. The clinical staff such as flight nurses work 24-hour shifts while pilots work 12 hour shifts.

The Bell 407 helicopter is equipped with a variety of critical care supplies and medications found in a hospital emergency room or ICU. These include items such as oxygen, airway resuscitation equipment, heart monitor/defibrillator, suction, IV pump and fluids, specialized monitor/testing equipment, ventilators, and emergency medications.

“Through our close partnership with Air Idaho Rescue and EIRMC, our residents and visitors will have the very best possible emergency care. By reducing air time for a helicopter to transport a critically impacted person to the nearest appropriate emergency room or trauma center, we’re giving the gift of swifter emergency care,” said Keith Gnagey, chief executive officer, Teton Valley Health Care.

Air Methods has additional air medical airplanes and helicopters throughout the region – including one fixed-wing in Idaho Falls at EIRMC and a rotor-wing at the seasonal West Yellowstone base. The aircraft are fully outfitted with night vision goggle capability, which enhances visibility during night transports so crews can better detect hazards and obstructions and have greater situational awareness. Further, the aircraft have a standard suite of advanced cockpit technologies to keep crews and patients safe and enhance the safety of operations.

“Placing the helicopter in Driggs is a move that will save lives. Response time to traumas in areas where most of our transports occur - this part of Idaho, Wyoming, and Yellowstone National Park will be dramatically reduced,” said Doug Crabtree, chief executive officer, Eastern Idaho Regional Medical Center. “Our partners in trauma care, including Air Idaho Rescue, EMS providers serving the region, and hospitals like Teton Valley Hospital, St. John’s Medical Center, StarValley Medical Center, Sublette County Rural Health Care District, and Madison Memorial, are continually seeking ways to improve outcomes for our patients. This is a huge step forward.”

TVHC communications manager Ann Loyola said there are a variety of reasons a patient would be transferred by air.

“The most common reason is the patient is in need of services not available locally,” she said. “For example, the patient might need a heart catheterization or a trauma surgeon. The decision to contact Air Idaho may be made by the EMS personnel assessing the patient or the medical provider at the hospital.”