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home in the county, regardless of past membership status, though new residents moving to the county after the June 1 start date will need to buy their own Air Methods Advantage memberships.

The life flight program is being paid for jointly by Union General Hospital Inc. and the Union County Government, with the county's portion of the cost estimated at about \$55,000.

There has been some confusion caused by renewal letters mailed in error by Air Methods.

For those who signed up last year, there is no need to renew memberships. Those memberships were, in effect, renewed automatically on June 1.

Air Methods has since mailed a subsequent letter to residents to explain the renewal mailout error.

"Please disregard the renewal letter as your coverage has been paid in advance by your community," reads the correction letter. "Coverage starts on June 1, 2017, and covers you through May 31, 2018."

Residents who renewed their memberships prior to the June 1 start date of countywide coverage can receive a refund by calling the Air Methods billing office at 1 (855) 877-2518, or emailing airmethodsadvantage@airmethods.com.

Air Methods Advantage memberships only cover

residents who are transported via Air Methods aircraft, such as the helicopter stationed at Union General, though all regional medical helicopter services respond to emergencies if needed and available.

If the Air Life Georgia helicopter is busy life-fighting a patient when another Union County resident requires an air ambulance, a competing service may respond.

Should a medical helicopter other than an Air Methods aircraft act as a transport, then the Air Methods Advantage membership would not apply to the flight provided by the other service.

An example of a competing air ambulance service is the Life Force 4 helicopter out of Blue Ridge, which offers its own membership plan through the AirMedCare Network.

The two helicopters – Air Life Georgia 14 and Life Force 4 – act as backups for each other in the event that the other is busy or down for maintenance, though only the Air Life Georgia helicopter is covered by Air Methods Advantage memberships.

Essentially, while the odds are in favor of being transported via the locally stationed Air Life Georgia helicopter that is covered by the Air Methods Advantage membership, residents could go a step further to protect themselves against out-of-pocket expenses by purchasing memberships with the separate air ambulance services in the region.

Being transported via medical helicopter is expensive, ranging in the tens of thousands of dollars per

flight. Usually, helicopter services are able to negotiate some payment through patients' insurance companies, though the out-of-pocket costs left over after insurance can still be many thousands of dollars.

On its company website, Air Methods says that members can ask their doctors or care providers to request an Air Methods aircraft if it is available and can safely meet the needs of the patient.

"If you are flown by an Air Methods aircraft for medical necessity in a location where Air Methods operates the aircraft, you will not have any out-of-pocket expense for the air medical transport," according to Air Methods literature. "Air Methods is the largest provider of air medical coverage in the United States, operating in 48 states."

"If you travel to an area where Air Methods operates, you can rest assured that your membership coverage will protect you from any out-of-pocket expense if you are flown for medical necessity by an Air Methods-operated aircraft."

Air Life Georgia 14 has been stationed at Union General Hospital since May of 2016, and has transported hundreds of patients to safety.

Any Union County Air Methods Advantage members who receive a medically necessary flight via the helicopter at Union General Hospital can take advantage of their memberships by calling the company's billing office following the flight, or upon receipt of a bill, at which time proof of residency will be required.

Even residents without health insurance are covered through the membership for Air Methods life flights.

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