

# Staging the Freedom House Story in Pittsburgh:

## World premiere play celebrates America's EMS pioneers

This January, a powerful new stage work celebrating the pioneers of our modern EMS system will have its world premiere production in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

The Prime Stage Theatre production of *Freedom House: Giving Life a Second Chance* dramatizes the 1967 creation in Pittsburgh of the Freedom House Ambulance Service, America's first mobile emergency medical unit staffed by professionally trained paramedics.

Written by playwright L.E. McCullough and directed by Scott Calhoon, the play focuses on themes of medical innovation and citizen empowerment. In addition to student matinees, *Freedom House: Giving Life a Second Chance* runs for seven mainstage performances Jan. 23-Feb. 1, 2026 at New Hazlett Theater.

"This is the first-ever stage production of the Freedom House story," says Prime Stage Theatre artistic director Dr. Wayne Brinda, "and it portrays a topic that couldn't be more timely, as America's public health resources face an ongoing wave of new challenges."

During its 8-year lifespan from 1967-1975, Freedom House Ambulance Service was initiated in the heart of Pittsburgh's predominantly African American Hill District neighborhood and served as the foundational model for today's paramedic profession and modern EMS departments around the world.

It was an extraordinary experiment in community medicine and workforce development involving physicians from the University of Pittsburgh, social activists from Freedom House Enterprises, philanthropists from the Maurice Falk Medical Fund and hospital staff of Mercy and Presbyterian hospitals, from where the Freedom House ambulances operated.

"One night by chance I watched the WQED/PBS television broadcast of *Freedom House Ambulance: The First Responders*, the excellent film documentary by Annette Banks," says McCullough. "It was a remarkable and very moving story, and I immediately saw the potential for reaching an expanded audience using the medium of live theatre."

McCullough is an accomplished historical playwright with more than 220 plays published and produced globally. His previous work for Prime Stage Theatre, a Pittsburgh Holocaust survivor play titled *Perseverance*, was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts grant in 2022 and received its world premiere in April 2023 as a co-production with the Holocaust Center of Pittsburgh.

The Freedom House story has been detailed in film and book formats, he notes.

"You have *Freedom House: Street Saviors* by Gene Starzenski, *Heroes on Call: The Forgotten Story of America's First Paramedics* by Georgina Gonzalez, *The Ambulance: A History* by Ryan Corbett Bell, and *American Sirens: The Incredible Story of the Black Men Who Became America's First Paramedics* by Kevin Hazzard. And there have been hundreds of articles in medical and EMS journals over the last five decades."

But, McCullough maintains, live theatre conveys the story through a lens that is uniquely personal and literally in-the-moment.

"The actors, the lighting, the set all intensify our experience of the story. Theatre brings us into an entirely different perceptual space than when we watch a movie or read a book. You can't help but feel the direct presence of those people who lived the history and felt those emotions."

Now in its 29th season, Prime Stage Theatre has presented over 100 productions that blend arts and education with literature and history-based plays that help audiences see bridges instead of barriers.

"The Freedom House story is an important story of resourcefulness and collaboration, and it's a story our community has said it wants to see portrayed onstage," says Wayne Brinda.

Additionally, he points out, *Freedom House: Giving Life a Second Chance* has significant value as a teaching and recruiting tool.

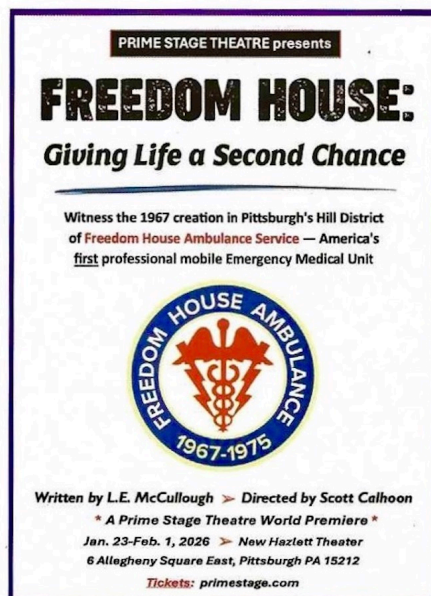
"It can be easily performed at a variety of venues including schools, community centers, neighborhood associations, medical and hospital facilities. We hope it serves as a way to let more people know about the transformative and lifesaving care EMS agencies perform every day in the U.S. and across the world."

The play's first public reading in May received positive support and feedback from several individuals in EMS, medical and community nonprofit groups, including original Freedom House Ambulance Service member Larry Underwood.

"Freedom House: Giving Life a Second Chance is a testament to Pittsburgh," he says. "It must be seen by everyone, especially African Americans and students. Freedom House was an inspiration to people back then, and it can be an inspiration again today."

For information on the Prime Stage Theatre world premiere of *Freedom House: Giving Life a Second Chance*, visit [www.primestage.com](http://www.primestage.com).

[Editor's Note: The National EMS Museum will be working with the Prime Stage Theatre to promote the play and will provide exhibits in the lobby about the history of EMS. Stay tuned for more information on that subject.]



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