

THREATS AGAINST TEMPORARY WORKERS UNDERCUT OTTAWA'S EFFORTS TO TACKLE PARAMEDIC CRISIS

OTTAWA – May 12, 2008

Ottawa residents received a nasty shock on March 31, 2008 - the day before April Fool's Day – when they discovered that their paramedic service had reached 'level zero' 42 times between December 2007 and February 2008. In other words, on 42 different occasions, all of the City's paramedics were busy – with none available for new calls.

Sadly, this shortage of paramedics is an old problem which has been pointed out for years by the union representing paramedics, professional associations, coroner's juries and various municipal politicians. And the situation is - if anything - getting worse. At least if we are to judge from the statistics contained in the most recent City of Ottawa Business Transformation Services *Quarterly Performance Report to Council* covering the period ending December 2007. It revealed that during 2007 the response time for life threatening emergency calls rose almost 40 seconds to 13:49 – an appalling state of affairs, considering that the medically required international standard is 8:59.

As to why response times are so much worse in Ottawa, the *Report* is equally blunt. It states, "The service does not have the staffing vs. call volume capacity to achieve the international standard." In other words, we don't have enough paramedics to meet the international standard Council has set for Ottawa.

To its credit, the City has been trying to hire more paramedics - with new money being earmarked for 38 new positions in the most recent municipal budget. Even so, some critics charge that this is simply too little, too late – and that without even more new hires Ottawa will be unable to keep up with the exploding demand for paramedics resulting from hospital backlogs, rapid population growth and the ageing of our citizens. They point to estimates suggesting that 50 to 60 new paramedics – over and above those being planned for – would have to be hired to get us even close to the target response time.

Given the gravity of the situation, you would think that managers at the City of Ottawa would be doing everything in their power to retain the paramedics they do have. The problem is that's not what's happening – at least judging by the behavior of some in management who seem determined to alienate or lay off a number of the paramedics working for them. A good example is the treatment being meted out to the roughly 45 paramedics who work for the City as temporary employees. These people have the same qualifications as those primary care paramedics who are permanent employees. They do exactly the same work and have the same shift schedules. And they do an excellent job of it - saving lives and making a difference in the community.

Under the current union contract, paramedics hired on a temporary basis are eligible to be made permanent once they have 24 months of consecutive service. Normally, you would think that's something the City would want to see happen – given the municipality's shortage of qualified paramedics. Unfortunately, that's not what's happening. For rather than try to retain these highly skilled professionals, some seem determined to find any excuse to lay off those paramedics hired on as temporary employees who are approaching 24 months of service. While yet others are putting pressure on temporary employees, making it clear that, unless they commit to undertake the coursework needed to become an advanced care paramedic, their chances of being made permanent are close to zero. Such a threat puts many temporary employees in an almost impossible bind since the one-year course costs around \$15,000. And it means having to choose between doing without a pay cheque for a year – clearly out of the question for many with mortgages to pay and young families to support – or trying to squeeze coursework into a working life made up of 12-hour shifts.

This hard-ball approach - which views paramedics as commodities that can be replaced any time you like - flies in the face of statements made by Anthony Di Monte, Chief of Ottawa's Paramedic Service, who has praised temporary paramedics for their hard work and promised they will be given every opportunity to seek permanent positions. And it shows a flagrant lack of concern and respect for these individuals who are making such an important contribution to the welfare of our community and its citizens.

Speaking of this bare-knuckle approach to industrial relations, Brian Madden, President of CUPE 503, the union local representing municipal paramedics, noted, "Ottawa paramedics do a superb job of serving this community – saving lives and helping their fellow citizens in crisis situations resulting from accidents and medical emergencies. The problem is that we don't have enough of them to cover the growing need for their services. So instead of threatening temporary staff with layoffs, City managers should be looking for ways to retain them so they can continue to serve our community for years to come."

Of the 45 temporary paramedics currently on staff, it is estimated that some 18 to 20 are coming up to their 24 months of service in June - with the remainder likely to reach that important milestone in the very near future. Should large numbers of them be forced out, the impact on Ottawa's emergency services would be devastating.