

# **Shortage of Paramedics Threatens Ottawa Emergency Services**

## **'Level Zero' Hits Ottawa**

What if you had a medical emergency, you called 9-11 for help - and no one came?

Scary thought, isn't it? Unfortunately, that's what almost happened in Ottawa on February 5, 2008 when the city's paramedic services hit "zero level" between 10 am and 5 pm. During that 7-hour period, all of the city's ambulances and paramedics were busy, leaving none free to handle new calls for help. This is not the first time it has happened in Ottawa. Sadly, it won't be the last.

February's crisis was the result of an unexpected jump in demand for Ottawa paramedics. Usually, they get 150 calls per day. On this particular Tuesday, they got more than 200 – and there weren't enough people on duty to cover the increased demand. To pick up the slack, the City had to draw on ambulances and crews from other communities – eventually requiring 13 additional ambulances from as far away as Rockland, Cornwall and Renfrew. While many were in the vicinity doing patient transfers, one had to be dispatched from Rockland to Vanier – a distance of 30 km. That's a very long trip when your life is hanging in the balance!

Since then, Ottawa citizens have discovered to their horror that such incidents are anything but rare – the most recent bombshell involving media reports indicating that Ottawa's paramedical services reached 'level zero' at least 42 times between December and February. And what's even scarier is that the City's paramedic services are rumored to reach 'level 1' pretty much on a daily basis - which means that there is only one or two ambulances free to cover the entire city. In such a situation, you had better hope that the ambulance responding to your call for help in Vanier is not in Manotick when contacted by the dispatcher.

## **The Problem – Not Enough Paramedics**

Of course, it's not like this is a new problem. Nor is there much dispute as to what we have to do to solve it. We need more paramedics – lots more. And we need them now. City politicians know that. And coroner's juries know that too – since they have included calls for more paramedics time and again in their recommendations. All that's required now is to do it.

For the fact is that Ottawa's emergency services have been close to the edge for years – as seen by statistics released in February 2005 by the Professional Paramedic Association of Ottawa detailing the problems facing the city in this area. It found that Ottawa stacked up poorly compared to other municipalities, given that it had:

- The lowest number of paramedics per capita;
- The lowest number of paramedics per call;
- The highest number of calls per paramedic; and
- One of the longest response times in Canada.

The Association went on to blast the working conditions of paramedics who saw their ability to take time off work reduced, had trouble taking vacations, had their mandatory annual paramedic training reduced or cancelled and were forced to work past the end of their shifts – shifts that were already 12 hours long.

Since then, not much has changed. For while it is true that a few more paramedics have been hired, the demand for their services has mushroomed even more, leaving us in pretty much the same place as before, a fact confirmed by figures released by the Ambulance Committee of Ontario showing that in 2006 ambulance response times in the Ottawa area averaged 12:32 minutes – three minutes more than the North America standard.

And just as in 2005, the working conditions of Ottawa paramedics remain poor - in part due to the attitude of their employer. A good example is the 2006 arbitration award which called on the City of Ottawa to abide by the *Employment Standards Act* and provide paramedics with regular lunch breaks. Speaking at the time, CUPE 503 President Brian Madden called the City's position unacceptable, declaring that, "Paramedics in Ottawa are dedicated individuals who work hard in an underfunded and understaffed system. Better ambulance service in Ottawa will not be achieved by depriving paramedics of their rights."

That message does seem to be getting through – however slowly – since the City is starting to hire more paramedics. This year's Budget contains money for 38 new paramedics. And it is anticipated that another 20 to 25 new paramedics will be hired annually over the next few years.

The problem is that it is too little, too late. For such limited staffing increases cannot undue the damage done by the 2003-04 hiring freeze while at the same time responding to the new – and increasing – demands being placed on Ottawa's paramedics. Which means the City is doomed to be perpetually behind the curve – unless efforts are made to hire even more paramedics and do whatever it takes to retain the people we already have. For the reality is that we just aren't keeping up with the growing demands for paramedics flowing from the ageing of our population and growth of our city. Nor are we addressing the new demands being placed on our paramedics – particular those with advanced care certification who are being called upon to do work once the sole preserve of doctors and nurses. These new levels of care translate into more time spent per patient – which is bound to place an even greater burden on already overworked paramedics.

### **Addressing the Challenge**

Basically, we're facing a crisis – and our success in handling it will have a major impact on the well-being of our citizens for years to come. To address it, we are going to need more paramedics – a lot more. And we are going to have to do a better job of retaining the paramedics we do have so other communities do not snatch them away. To do this we will have to begin paying salaries comparable to those offered in Western Canada and

other parts of Ontario. And we will have provide staff with decent working conditions – without having to be ordered to do so by an arbitrator, as is so often the case now.

We will also have to make better use of our existing paramedics and increase the pool of qualified paramedics we have to draw on.

For example, we need to ensure that paramedics do not find themselves cooling their heels at hospital ERs, waiting for doctors or nurses to take patients off their hands. Currently, the average wait time for most paramedics is about an hour – during which time they are unable to take new calls.

And we need to find ways of encouraging and supporting those people interested in become paramedics. At present, it takes about two years of post-secondary education to qualify as a Primary Care Paramedic. To qualify as an Advanced Care Paramedic requires one more year after that. For many people – particularly those with a mortgage or a young family – this can represent an insurmountable barrier since it means going without a pay cheque for 2 or 3 years. So we need to find ways of helping such people realize their dream of becoming a paramedic. One way might involve sponsoring promising candidates on the understanding that they will work for the City once their coursework is completed. In the case of those City of Ottawa paramedics who want to become Advanced Care Paramedics, the answer might be for the City to work with the union to develop flexible or part-time work schedules that would allow them to upgrade their skills while still earning enough money to pay the bills.

But whatever we do, we need to do it right away since the time for dithering is over – as the 42 recent ‘zero level’ incidents make abundantly clear. Like it or not, municipal politicians are going to have to bite the bullet and make some serious additional investments in our emergency management system. For what’s at stake are people’s lives – people who may not be so lucky the next time we have a spike in demand for paramedics. So it’s vital that we get our act together now so the citizens of Ottawa can be certain that the next time there’s a spike in demand for paramedics, the people will be there to answer each and every call for help.