

Paramedics

The City of Ottawa gained the responsibility for providing Paramedic Services on January 1, 2001. Since that time, the Service has grown and taken its place alongside the City's Police and Fire Services as a key protector of public safety in the national capital region. The public has come to both trust and rely on the Ottawa Paramedic Service and CUPE 503 proudly represents many of the professionals that make up the service including its Paramedics, Communications Officers, Logistics staff and Biomedical Technologists.

Ottawa's Paramedic Service has always faced pressures in terms of being able to provide the level of service that is needed to keep the public safe. It has often been the case that the volume and complexity of calls has meant that there are simply not enough paramedics and ambulances available to respond to emergency calls. This lack of resources and its impact on public safety has been addressed in two separate coroner's inquests investigating deaths in Ottawa.



In October of 2004 a Coroner's jury tasked with investigating the death of Alice

Martin found that Ottawa's Paramedic Service had "significantly fewer recourses (per sq. km. and per call) to meet its EMS demands compared to other major Canadian cities" and that "Ottawa EMS cannot achieve its targets, and adequately operate according to the deployment plan with its current resources".³

That same Coroner's jury recommended that fourteen paramedics whose hiring had been deferred by City Council be immediately hired and that the:

"City of Ottawa maintain, on an ongoing basis, adequate paramedic staffing levels in order to ensure target response times are met into the future as call volumes and requests for service increase."

In response to these recommendations, the City committed to ensuring that it provided sufficient paramedic resources to keep up with future demands and increasing call volumes.

Despite this commitment to ensure adequate Paramedic Service staffing, just over three years later, in December of 2007, another Coroner's jury assessed the City's Paramedic Service and

³ Report to City's Emergency and Protective Services Committee by Steve Kanellakos, 31 August 2005

again found it to be wanting. That jury, investigating the death of Stéphane Michaud at the Ottawa International Airport found again that a lack of paramedic staffing directly impacted the outcome of a life-threatening call. The jury recommended that:

“the Ottawa Paramedic Service hire sufficient paramedics as quickly as possible so as to allow it to respond to life threatening (Code 4) ambulance calls within eight minutes and fifty-nine seconds in the high density area of the City 90% of the time, and within fifteen minutes and fifty nine seconds in the low density area of the City 90% of the time.”

Once again, the response from the City to these jury recommendations was to pledge to ensure that more paramedics were hired immediately and that future hiring would keep up with increasing demand.⁴

And once again, as time went on, this pledge went unfulfilled. Call volume has been steadily rising for several years now but paramedic hiring has simply not kept pace. In 2021 calls to the City’s paramedic service increased 12.6% with a further increase of 23.3% in 2022 representing an increase in call volume of 36% in only two years.

Not only does failing to invest in adequate numbers of paramedics put the community at risk, but it also results in significant increased costs to the City through higher sick leave and WSIB claims as our members simply cannot cope any more with the demands being placed upon them. In a survey conducted by the Union in 2022, two thirds of our paramedic service members reported that workplace stress levels were so high that they viewed their co-workers as being in distress on the job.⁵

Internal reports prepared by the City’s Paramedic Service have reached the same conclusion. In a report submitted to the City’s Community and Protective Services Committee on June 6, 2023 Chief Pierre Poirier wrote that:

“the steady increase in service demand, including unprecedented increases in response volume, offload delay and level zero events, is negatively impacting employee wellness. In 2016, the average number of staff on WSIB was 11.3 each month and by 2022, there were an average of 60.1 staff on WSIB leave each month.”⁶

Chief Poirier’s report went on to note that, in that same seven-year period, WSIB leaves had increased 250.2% representing 162,757 service hours lost in 2022. That is the equivalent of taking 75 paramedics off the road. Sick leave claims similarly exploded over the same time period rising 21.1% to amount to 143,000 hours lost in 2022 – the equivalent of taking a further 66 full time paramedics off the road.

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4 Report to City’s Community and Protective Services Committee by Steve Kanellakos, 7 March 2008

5 “Union Survey Finds Paramedics Facing High Stress with Little Support: [CBC News](#) January 26, 2022

6 Report to City’s Emergency and Protective Services Committee by Pierre Poirier, 6 June 2023

As a Schedule 2 employer under Ontario's worker's compensation system, the costs of this massive amount of WSIB leave are the City's to bear.

Continuing in the way the Service has been operating is simply not an option. Funding more than 140 paramedic positions that are off on WSIB or on sick leave is a poor investment and it is unsustainable. More paramedics and related staff are needed and they are needed now.

CUPE 503 believes that money spent now on improving the staffing levels at the City's Paramedic Service will result in immediate and long-lasting savings to the City while also improving public safety and ensuing more rapid responses to medical emergencies in our communities.

This is an investment that will pay for itself in a very short period of time.