

Calgarians wait longer for ambulance response after provincial takeover: data

Superboard says service unchanged despite lower success meeting targets

BY SUZANNE WILTON, WITH FILES FROM JEN GERSON, CALGARY HERALD MAY 17, 2010



An Alberta Health Services ambulance takes a call on May 15, 2010 in the MacKenzie Lake area. Recent reports state that response time has slowed down since the Alberta Health Services took over running the provincial ambulance service.

Photograph by: Colleen De Neve, Calgary Herald

Calgarians facing a life or death emergency are waiting longer for an ambulance since the provincial takeover of emergency medical services, according to data obtained by the Herald.

In the first year Alberta Health Services ran the city's ambulance service, paramedics made it to calls deemed life-threatening in the targeted time of under eight minutes 65 per cent of the time. For the year 2008, the last year the city ran the service, it met the same target 78 per cent of the time.

The revelations come two months after Alberta's health minister halted the centralization of ambulance dispatch services throughout the province, after hearing concerns from communities worried about slow response times.

Release of data for Calgary -- reflecting the performance of EMS from April 1, 2009, to April 1, 2010 --

also comes on the heels of a red alert in the city, where no ambulances were available to transport patients for 18 minutes.

Despite figures showing its own performance targets are not being met almost 40 per cent of the time, health officials maintain ambulance service hasn't suffered.

"Nothing has really changed for Calgarians. They're getting the same level of service they were before," said Darren Sandbeck, AHS's director of EMS operations for Calgary and central zones.

"We've done very well," said Sandbeck. "We started the year on April 1 (2009) with the commitment that there would be no degradation of service and there has not been," said Sandbeck, noting the number of staff, ambulances and equipment remains the same.

But critics say the numbers tell a different story, charging the response-time data is further evidence the amalgamation of ambulance services across Alberta is failing.

"They can spin this any way they want to, but the clock tells the tale," said Liberal Leader David Swann, a doctor and former medical officer of health.

"I've heard this across the province, and more particularly in the smaller cities -- Red Deer and Lethbridge -- that response times have increased and that does put people at increased risk," added Swann.

"If it's taking longer to get to people, they are failing in their job to provide access to service."

When EMS was run by the city, it set a target to respond to life-threatening incidents in seven minutes and 59 seconds or less, and a goal of meeting those targets 90 per cent of the time.

According to City of Calgary yearend reports, EMS met that target 78 per cent of the time in 2008, the year before the province took over funding and operations from municipalities, and in the two years previous.

There was no data available showing performance levels for the first three months of 2009.

However, in the 2009-2010 fiscal year, the province took over responsibility (ending March 31, 2010), the same targets were met only 65 per cent of the time. AHS wouldn't release week-by-week breakdowns, showing the longest and shortest response times, or year-over-year data.

Sandbeck, and other EMS officials, declined to comment on the city's compliance rates, saying it was not comparable to the same data compiled by AHS because the database has changed.

However, he acknowledged a decline in response times to life or death emergency calls.

"Nationally, there's a trend over the last half a decade of declining delta compliance," Sandbeck said. Delta compliance refers to meeting the target response times.

"We're no exception to that. We would like the system to perform better, obviously, but that's our reality."

Sandbeck said the decline is due to a variety of factors, including population growth, geographic growth in the response area, traffic patterns, construction levels and hospital wait times.

He pointed out there are different response targets in different areas of the province.

Edmonton, for instance, has a target of responding to life or death emergencies in under nine minutes, a minute longer than Calgary.

AHS is planning on changing its benchmarks so all areas of the province have the same target response time, though what that time will be hasn't been decided, said Sandbeck.

"That makes no sense," said Swann. "Because we're not achieving the goal we loosen the standards?"

"That is unacceptable to Albertans."

It's unacceptable to those taking care of patients, too, said the head of the union representing Calgary paramedics.

"If it's Jarome Iginla and he scores 15 per cent less goals . . . people are going to say he's underperforming," said Rick Fraser, president of CUPE Local 3421.

"At the end of the day, the goal is to get there in the least amount of time possible. It weighs heavy on your mind every minute that passes and you cannot get to the call," said Fraser.

Fraser agreed with AHS that the quality of care is the same, as is the level of equipment, but said response times are slower.

"If you can't get there, what's the difference?" he asked.

Whether it's a child choking at the dinner table, someone having a heart attack or a car crash where someone has suffered life-threatening injuries, "seconds matter," said Fraser, who called on AHS to investigate the cause of declining response times.

He attributed longer ambulance wait times to paramedics being tied up in the hallways of city hospitals, sometimes for hours at a time.

That, he says, results in ambulance shortages.

Data provided by AHS shows that, on average, ambulances were tied up in hospitals one hour and nine minutes in the past year -- a figure Fraser disputes.

"If you asked any paramedic . . . the average turnaround time is an hour, they would laugh in your face," he said.

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