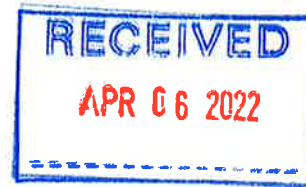




Office of the Minister
MLA, Calgary - Varsity



MAR 25 2022

AR 197282

Cathy Heron
President
Alberta Municipalities
300, 8616 - 51 Avenue NW
Edmonton, AB T6E 6E6
president@abmunis.ca

Dear Cathy Heron:

Thank you for your letter regarding the *Responsibility of Ambulance Service Delivery* resolution passed by the Alberta Municipalities (AM). I apologize for the delay in response.

This resolution calls on the Government of Alberta to "immediately consult with municipalities and the Health Services Association of Alberta, to develop a plan to make urgently needed improvements to the delivery and performance of the ambulance system where municipalities are recognized and compensated for the role they play in support of the provincial health care system."

I understand your concerns and share your desire to ensure Albertans have access to high-quality Emergency Medical Services (EMS); in particular that the most critical patients receive timely access to care.

Similar to many other components of the health care system, Alberta's EMS has been heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been challenged by a sustained 30 per cent increase in call volumes since spring 2021. The strain of increased volumes has been compounded by staffing shortages caused by illness and fatigue, and delays in transferring care of patients to hospital emergency department staff.

One cumulative impact of these factors has been an increase in response times for EMS crews as resources are shifted to cover call demands. These factors have put tremendous pressure on EMS over the past few months. This situation is not unique to Alberta as similar pressures have been felt by EMS nationally and globally.

Alberta's government recognizes that the strain on EMS is a top concern for many Albertans, including frontline EMS practitioners. This is why the government is investing an additional \$64 million to support EMS capacity, which represents a 12.2 per cent funding increase.

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This includes: \$28 million to add more ground ambulances to help meet high demand and improve response times in addition to sustainable funding for helicopter air ambulance services; \$22 million to increase capacity, extend ground ambulance contracts, and support integrated operations centres and inter-facility transport projects; and \$14 million to help address fatigue issues experienced by ambulance crews.

In addition to increasing EMS funding, on January 24, 2022, I announced the creation of the Alberta EMS Provincial Advisory Committee (AEPAC) to provide a collaborative forum to generate advice on issues and solutions for the provision of EMS in Alberta within the existing service delivery model. AEPAC's scope includes focus on EMS dispatch, ground and air ambulance services (including system, process, and outcome improvements) as well as supporting further EMS integration within the health system. AM is an important and valued member of AEPAC, which will submit an interim report in May 2022 and a final report in July 2022.

Part of that January 2022 announcement was that the province will engage independent health system experts to conduct a review of Alberta's EMS dispatch system. The objective review will inform improvements that can be made to dispatch services overall. This review is to be completed by September 2022.

AEPAC will also provide advice that will be used in the development of a Service Plan being led by Alberta Health Services (AHS). The Service Plan will provide strategic direction for EMS over the next five to 10 years, and will be submitted to me no later than September 2022.

I have also directed the Health Quality Council of Alberta to develop a comprehensive set of performance measures that look at more aspects of the EMS system, including patient and practitioner experience, health outcomes, and value for money.

Additionally, on January 24, 2022, AHS announced a 10-point action plan to mitigate and manage EMS challenges. Actions include:

- developing a strategic provincial service plan for EMS delivery in the province;
- hiring more paramedics;
- launching pilot projects to manage non-emergency inter-facility transfers;
- initiating an 'hours of work' project to help ease staff fatigue;
- transferring low-priority calls to other agencies in consultation with EMS physicians;
- stopping the automatic dispatch of ambulances to motor vehicle collisions that do not have injuries;
- completing an evaluation by an emergency communications officer to determine if an ambulance from out of the area is the most appropriate to respond if it is closest to a 911 call;
- creating a new integrated operations centre in Calgary;
- implementing a pilot project in Red Deer that will manage most patient transfers between facilities with dedicated transfer units, freeing up ambulances to handle emergency calls; and
- instead of being automatically dispatched, allowing ambulances to be pre-empted from assignments when a 911 call is received to ensure that more ambulances are available for critical patients.

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The majority of the 10 points being implemented are beginning to show results in communities across the province.

Also, in line with established policy, the position of the Ministry of Health is that Medical First Response (MFR) is part of municipalities' public safety responsibility rather than the health system. Municipalities enrol in the Alberta MFR Program on a voluntary basis and are able to choose the types of EMS events to which they respond following a request from EMS dispatch. For this reason, the Ministry has no plans to directly compensate municipalities for MFR activities. However, AEPAC has established a sub-committee to look at MFR, and I welcome AEPAC's advice to both reduce reliance on MFR providers and improve the program.

Please be assured that addressing EMS system pressures during this unprecedented time is a priority. Alberta's government is committed to ensuring that Albertans continue to receive the safe, high-quality care they need.

Thank you again for writing, for your participation on AEPAC, and your advocacy on behalf of Alberta municipalities.

Sincerely,



Jason Copping
Minister of Health

cc: Honourable Ric McIver, Minister of Municipal Affairs