



July 2019

Funding cuts and ambulance shortages

In May, the Ford government announced it is freezing land ambulance grants at 2017-2018 levels. Despite reversing some in-year budget cuts after a public outcry, they did not reverse this cut, which has left municipalities scrambling to sort out the full impact of what could be a cut of \$40-50 million province-wide. Ontario paramedics, the bulk of whom are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), are questioning how it will be possible for municipalities to absorb a cut that large without negative effects to service levels.

Over the last several years, the province has funded 50% of municipalities' costs for ambulance services, with that funding based on prior-year cost, plus an increase for inflation and additional costs. (The exceptions are First Nations ambulance services, dispatch centres, and base hospitals, which are all funded at 100% by the province). In freezing this year's transfer at 2017 levels after municipalities have already set their budgets, the Ford government is forcing communities to absorb another in-year budget cut, this one amounting to \$40-50 million.

It is up to municipalities to decide how they are going to manage what is effectively another download of costs. But we are already seeing the effect of this freeze at 2017 levels – certain planned investments have been cancelled. Other municipal services, equally vital, are on the chopping block because these sorts of cuts force cities to make impossible choices.

In multiple communities across Ontario, “code zeros” are routine. These are times when there are no paramedics/ambulances available on the road to respond to calls. This issue is generally attributed to increased call volume and lack of funding for paramedic services. In addition to the threat this poses to patients requiring immediate response when they need an ambulance, the lack of available resources directly contributes to missed meal breaks for paramedics, and end of shift overtime, in order to meet the demands of the increased call volume. CUPE has undertaken a comprehensive research project to obtain data on the frequency of code zero events throughout the province; this project is ongoing and we will be reporting in the months to come.

We know that land ambulance calls are increasing at a rate of at least 3.5% per year¹. And very few ambulance services have been able to increase the number of paramedics to meet this growing demand. So how does the system absorb a funding shortfall of this magnitude? Can the Ford government assure Ontarians there will be an ambulance there when they

¹ <https://www.amo.on.ca/AMO-PDFs/Reports/2016/ExpandingMedicalResponsesDiscussionPaperMOHLTCNov2.aspx>

need one? Paramedics are on the front line every day, and we know what the impact of this freeze will be. It starves an already over-taxed system.

Across the province, what's needed is a greater investment in paramedic services, not cutbacks that threaten our ability to be there when you need it most.

Risks of privatization and restructuring chaos

The government's plans to restructure the land ambulance system, and leaked reports from consultants with close ties to the premier, suggest that privatization is on the agenda. Lobbyists for Medavie, a company with many for-profit subsidiaries, have been meeting with the government at Queen's Park.

For many reasons this worries us.

Privatization comes with a significant loss of public control, transparency and accountability. And the introduction of a profit motive into a major area of healthcare. Again and again, we have seen service levels, transparency and accountability plummet when public funds are used to fund private profits.

Medavie's finances are secret – and this means we have no way of knowing how lucrative it is for them or their subsidiaries to operate publicly funded services. They manage over \$1 billion in public funds over several different geographical regions, but we know very little about their finances. Medavie hides behind the fact that a portion of its business is not-for-profit, but many of the subsidiaries involved in running public services and managing public funds are in fact for-profit.

We do know that in Muskoka, the municipality decided not to renew Medavie's contract, and they brought the service back in-house. And there have been problems documented in other regions as well. We know that privatization will not be good for patient care, or response times, or the quality of paramedic jobs.

A complex, needless restructuring that no one asked for will also increase costs (amalgamating services over large geographical areas has been repeatedly shown to drive costs upwards), create chaos, and negatively affect patient care.

We are asking our MPPs to speak out against funding cuts to paramedic services, and to oppose privatization.

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