
NEWS RELEASE

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Ministry of Health Services

LEGISLATION INTRODUCED TO RESTORE EMERGENCY CARE

VICTORIA – The Province is taking action to restore full emergency care to protect British Columbians, Minister of Health Services Kevin Falcon announced today in introducing legislation to end the strike by CUPE 873, the union representing BC Ambulance Service (BCAS) paramedics and dispatchers.

“With the H1N1 pandemic impacting the acute care system and winter and the holiday season fast approaching, the public needs certainty that they’ll have the care they need in an emergency,” Falcon said. “The decision to introduce this legislation was a difficult one and certainly not one that we take lightly. But it was clear that after seven months of failed attempts to reach an agreement and with no hope for a negotiated settlement in sight, we had to act.”

Falcon stated while the system is coping, pressure is increasing both in emergency departments and critical care areas across the province. He added health authorities are under further stress from increasing absenteeism, with up to 25 per cent of staff not reporting to work at BC Women’s Hospital last week alone due to illness.

Falcon said despite an essential services order, the dispute has had a profound impact on service delivery.

“In the Lower Mainland, the number of ambulances out of service each month has jumped to 150, compared to just 12 per month before the strike began,” said Falcon. “With the rest of our health care system already operating at full capacity to manage the impact of H1N1, we can’t afford to have the ambulance service operating at less than peak effectiveness.”

He added that every day the strike continues, it increases the risk to patients.

Falcon said the settlement outlined in the Ambulance Service Collective Agreement Act reflects the latest offer made to the union in September. The one-year deal is retroactive to April 1, 2009, and includes a competitive compensation increase of three per cent, in line with wage increases for other public sector workers in 2009.

“We believe this increase is more than generous at a time of global economic uncertainty,” said Falcon. “We are also profoundly aware there is no more room in the BCAS budget to increase compensation without undermining service delivery.”

Since April, the estimated cost impact of the strike is \$9.2 million, which represents the cost of putting nine additional ambulances on the road for one year.

He noted the September offer had also included a further 1.2 per cent increase, contingent on both sides finding efficiencies within the collective agreement, which the union flatly refused. As a result this amount was not included as part of the legislation, however, he noted BCAS would still be willing to work collaboratively with the union to achieve the 1.2 per cent if their position changed.

Falcon said he is also calling on the Minister of Labour to appoint an Industrial Inquiry Commissioner as soon as possible to identify options for repairing the broken labour relations structure within the ambulance service.

Graphs showing the impact of the strike and paramedic availability on the Lower Mainland are available in the government online media room at <http://www.mediaroom.gov.bc.ca/DisplayEventDetails.aspx?eventId=461>.

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Two backgrounders follow.

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BACKGROUND

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BC AMBULANCE SERVICE – STRIKE IMPACTS

Despite the essential services order, BCAS has experienced significant staffing shortages since job action began on April 1, 2009, which have been unpredictable and fluctuated greatly each day. These staffing challenges have most often occurred in areas of the province which have historically had no previous such staffing challenges.

For example, in the Lower Mainland the number of ambulances out of service due to staffing shortages before the strike was an average of just 12 ambulances per month, less than one vehicle every few days. Since the start of the strike and despite the essential services order, that figure has jumped to 150 ambulances out of service every month, an average of five a day.

Dates where staffing has been a significant issue include:

- May 12, 2009 (Election Day) – The Lower Mainland had 38 ambulances out of service during the peak of the labour action and Election Day protest by CUPE 873.
- July 29 - Aug. 1, 2009 – Eleven paramedics worked the July 22, 2009 Celebration of Lights event. Despite the events being declared an essential service by the Labour Relations Board, the union directed paramedics not to work the events on July 29 and Aug. 1 resulting in no CUPE 873 paramedics at the events.
- Aug. 21, 2009 – Only two out of eight ambulances were staffed in Whistler, Pemberton, Squamish and Lions Bay during a period of escalating job action.
- Sept. 19 - 20, 2009 - The Lower Mainland had up to 32 ambulances out of service following a CUPE 873 rally and new job action direction by CUPE 873. No ambulances were staffed in Whistler, Hope, and Agassiz. Communities such as Cumberland that have not experienced a shortage in 25 years had no ambulance and the dispatch Centre for the Interior and North had a 60 per cent drop in staffing.

In addition to challenges staffing ambulances, the labour dispute has also had a significant impact on ambulance service delivery to the public in other ways, for example:

- Over 350 paramedic students have been unable to complete their paramedic training due to the unions' refusal to participate in student practicums. This has prevented new recruits from joining the service, prevented new hires from completing their probationary training and forced the Justice Institute of BC to cancel future paramedic courses.
- Patient care records have been damaged, lost and tampered with, resulting in delays in ambulance billing and delays and challenges in recording, storing and retrieving patients' medical records.
- Participation in medical research has been impacted with medical research devices used by paramedics damaged, lost and removed from ambulances resulting in the withdrawal of Vancouver-area paramedics from a research trial aimed at improving cardiac arrest survival.

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BC AMBULANCE SERVICE – COMPENSATION

- Full-time paramedic wages are very similar across Canada; compared to other jurisdictions, BCAS wage and benefits package is among the most competitive in the country. A small number of metropolitan cities like Toronto and Durham pay more, and a large number of jurisdictions like Saskatoon and Nova Scotia pay less, but the vast majority pay very similar wages.
- BCAS paramedics' pension benefits are one of the most generous in the provincial public service. Paramedics in B.C. can retire five years earlier than most of the public service, but with similar, if not better, pension benefits.
- In 2008-09, on average, full-time primary care paramedics earned over \$64,000 and advanced care paramedics earned over \$91,000 in regular pay and overtime.
- The majority of full-time paramedics, working the most common shift pattern, have received up to a 29 per cent compounded wage increase between 2001-02 and 2008-09.
- Expenditures on paramedic wages have risen 83 per cent from \$78 million in 2000 to \$144 million in 2008-09.

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