

Toronto takes legal action to boost ambulance service during strike

Average emergency response times have slipped by nearly one minute since start of labour disruption

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A 53-second spike in average response times to critical emergency calls has spurred the City of Toronto to take legal action to restore paramedics to near full strength in the current civic workers' strike.

With 75 per cent of paramedics still on the job under an "essential services" agreement used in the last strike in 2002, the city now wants to push the level up.

Friday, with 30,000 members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees off the job since June 22, the city filed a request with the Ontario Labour Relations Board to add 22 ambulances on weekdays and 27 extra on weekends, both over 24-hour periods.

At a press conference, Toronto Emergency Medical Services chief Bruce Farr said a pre-strike average response time of 8 minutes 18 seconds had climbed to an average of 9 minutes 11 seconds over the past four weeks.

"Over time, I am seeing it slip by 53 seconds," he said, citing an analysis of 26,000 EMS calls. "Now is the time to act in the best interest of public safety."

A decision from the board is not expected for several days. Mayor David Miller said the request, if granted, would apply in future strikes.

But CUPE local 416 president Mark Ferguson, whose members include paramedics, disputed the need for a change.

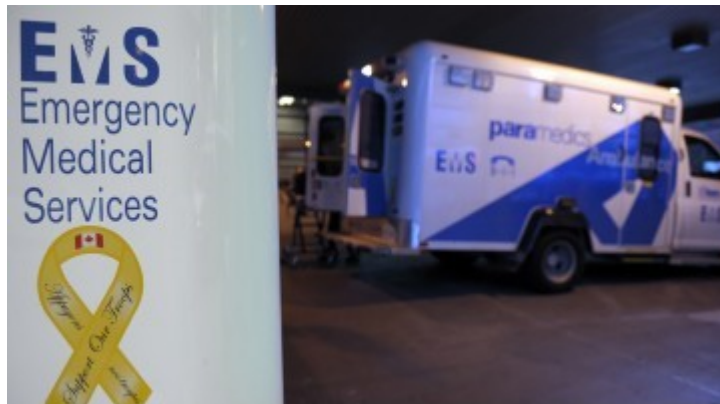
"There are sufficient resources on the road to protect the health and safety of the citizens of Toronto," he said, vowing to oppose the request.

EMS's Mr. Farr said the "gold standard" for response times is 8 minutes 59 seconds. Early in the strike, he said he was "comfortable" that high-priority calls were being handled in the time-frame, with a slower response for non-emergencies.

City spokesman Kevin Sack said "to the city's knowledge, there have been no fatalities" tied to the longer response times.

City officials say there is no link between their call for enhanced ambulance service and an incident in June when Toronto paramedics took more than half an hour to respond to a 911 call to help James Hearst, who later died. The Ontario Ministry of Health is carrying out a review of the incident.

But Alejandro Martinez Ramirez, 31, Mr. Hearst's common-law partner, said "I do think that it's related." Though pleased the city is trying to put more paramedics on the ground to prevent "making any future mistakes," he expressed frustration at having no answers about what happened the night his partner died.



“They keep denying that there was anything done wrong that night,” he said. “I would like them to own up to the fact that they weren’t there when Jim died.”