

Paramedic Mental Health and Wellness

Date: January 27, 2021

To: City Council

From: Chief People Officer and A/Chief, Toronto Paramedic Services

Wards: All

SUMMARY

The purpose of this report is to respond to the November 25, 2020, City Council request that the Chief People Officer and the Acting Chief, Toronto Paramedic Services, in collaboration and consultation with Toronto Civic Employees' Union (TCEU), Local 416, address staff fatigue and mental health amongst frontline paramedics and report back on the progress to the February 2 and 3, 2021, meeting of City Council.

Workload can have a significant impact on an employee's mental health and wellness. While emergency call volume has decreased since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Paramedics now require additional time and focus to perform proper infection prevention and control procedures before and after each emergency call (e.g., PPE donning and doffing, equipment and vehicle cleaning/disinfecting, etc.).

Continuing healthcare capacity challenges are also anticipated to result in significant ambulance offload delays in 2021, which will negatively impact ambulance availability in the community and response times to critically-ill patients. Maintaining ambulance availability will be dependent on securing additional staff to address these pressures

Ongoing Supports for Paramedic Health & Wellness

The City and Toronto Paramedic Services have continued to implement and maintain initiatives to support the wellness of all Toronto Paramedic Services staff, including:

- Dedicated in-house Staff Psychologist/Psychological Associate in place since 1986 who provides 24/7 confidential consultation, and a Peer Resource Team established in the late 1980s to provide confidential peer-to-peer support.
- Peer-led training (2016-2018) for all staff, encompassing Psychological First Aid, suicide prevention/intervention, and anti-stigma training.
- Part-time Paramedic classification introduced in 2014 to provide full-time staff with greater opportunities for time off and to reduce the need for full-time Paramedics to work additional hours.
- Psychological Health and Wellness Plan for all staff (launched in February 2017).

- Implementation of more compassionate administration of existing Collective Agreement provisions (February 2018), meant to increase support for Paramedics involved in difficult emergency calls.
- Introduction of increased psychological benefits entitlement in 2018 for Paramedics and their eligible family members.
- City-sponsored TCEU Local 416 representative assigned to assist Paramedics in a safe and early return to work from injuries and illnesses (assigned in January 2019).
- City-approved provision of psychological services for part-time Paramedics through the City's benefits provider, Green Shield Canada.
- Launch of a Staff Support Centre in March 2020, at the outset of the pandemic, staffed by both management and union representatives, to respond to staff inquiries and provide centralized support and tracking for all COVID-19-related absences.
- Expansion of the Telehealth program since March 2020 to reduce the number of Paramedic responses to 9-1-1 calls.

Following consultation with both TCEU Local 416 (CUPE) and People and Equity, Toronto Paramedic Services will be undertaking various further measures to support the mental health and wellness of all Paramedics as outlined in this report.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Chief People Officer and Acting Chief, Toronto Paramedic Services recommend that:

1. City Council receive this report for information.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There is no financial impact arising from this report.

The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has been provided the financial impacts associated with this program for review as part of the 2021 budget process.

DECISION HISTORY

At its meeting of November 25, 2020, City Council adopted the Executive Committee report from the City Manager and the Chief People Officer – *Ratio of Full-time to Part-time Paramedics*. City Council requested that the Chief People Officer and the Chief, Toronto Paramedic Services, in collaboration and consultation with CUPE Local 416, address staff fatigue and mental health amongst frontline paramedics and report back on the progress to the February 2 and 3, 2021, meeting of City Council.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2020.EX16.21>

COMMENTS

Meetings with TCEU Local 416

Since the November 25, 2020, Council Motion, Toronto Paramedic Services and TCEU Local 416 (CUPE) have met four times to discuss issues related to staffing, workload and wellness.

In reviewing data related to wellness (e.g., lost-time injuries, psychological benefit utilization), it was noted that mental health and wellness claims were generally higher across the service and there is now a greater awareness among employees of the importance of addressing mental health issues early in the treatment process.

Ongoing Supports for All Toronto Paramedic Services Staff

The City and Toronto Paramedic Services have implemented several initiatives to support the wellness of all Toronto Paramedic Services staff, including part-time Paramedics:

- In February 2017, Toronto Paramedic Services launched a comprehensive Psychological Health and Wellness Plan for all staff, focused on prevention, reduction of stigma, timely intervention, post-incident support and increasing available resources. The Plan was developed in consultation with Union Locals 416 and 79, the City's Employee Assistance Program staff, City of Toronto Ombudsman, and People & Equity's Disability Management section. The Plan includes the following:
 - Enhancement of the in-house, volunteer Peer Resource Team (PRT) established in the late 1980s to provide 24/7 confidential, peer-to-peer support to TPS staff. Selection and training of the team has been enriched and the team was doubled in size to 30 members to ensure greater accessibility for staff and sustainability of PRT members.
 - Dedicated in-house Staff Psychologist/Psychological Associate position in place since 1986 who provides 24/7 confidential consultation; short-term, evidence-based, clinical interventions; information and referral to community-based services; assistance with navigation of mental health systems, including WSIB; crisis intervention; and staff education.
 - An extensive list of online resources for all Toronto Paramedic Services staff, including access to self-help/monitoring tools as well as listings of mental health resources in employees' own communities.
 - From August 2019 to August 2020, out of six available self-help tools, the highest and most consistently used tool was for Stress Reduction.
 - Other available self-help tools to help identify mental health issues early and take immediate action (e.g., FeelingBetterNow®)

- Protocols implemented for pre-emptive notifications to PRT and Staff Psychologist/Psychological Associate based on category of calls responded to by frontline staff (i.e., Paramedics and EMDs) and in-person follow-up support by frontline Superintendents; notification of Local 416 also provided with consent of frontline staff.
 - Peer-led training (2016-2018) for all staff, encompassing Psychological First Aid, suicide prevention/intervention, and anti-stigma training.
- City-approved provision of psychological services for full-time and part-time Paramedics through the City's benefits provider, Green Shield Canada.
 - For full-time Paramedics, \$3,500 is available per person, per calendar year and for eligible family members.
 - Psychological services for part-time Paramedics is provided through the online, therapist-assisted BEACON program (launched spring 2020).
 - From 2019 to 2020, there was a 19.7% increase in fees for psychological services paid to full-time Paramedics.
- The City's Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is available to assist staff and their families. Family Services EAP (FSEAP) is also available exclusively to TCEU Local 416 members.
- Toronto Paramedic Services' senior staff meets on a quarterly basis, or as feasible, with the executive of the TCEU, Local 416 Paramedic Unit to address concerns of Paramedics and the Division. In 2020, the parties met twice (March, September).
- Toronto Paramedic Services' cross-divisional Commander staff meet monthly with the shop stewards and executive of the TCEU Local 416 Paramedic Unit to discuss new and upcoming matters and to resolve issues of mutual concern, with the objective of avoiding disputes. In 2020, all but one of these meetings were cancelled by mutual agreement due to the pandemic.
- Since March 17, 2020, Toronto Paramedic Services has operated a Staff Support Centre (SSC) that serves as a centralized information resource for all Toronto Paramedic Services staff and tracks COVID-19-related absences for all staff. In addition, the SSC:
 - Provides guidance on workplace exposure/self-isolation/quarantine and wellness checks;
 - Completes prompt referrals for COVID-19 testing and workplace contact tracing to identify at-risk staff, thereby mitigating spread within the workplace;
 - Ensures pre-shift screening is completed and follows up in real time for failed screening;
 - Tracks and reports divisional staff failed screening, self-isolation, quarantine and cleared-to-return-to-work metrics daily.
- Group psycho-educational sessions are offered to staff following mass casualty events and significant events where multiple staff are called upon to respond to a stressful incident. (e.g., Yonge St. van attack, Danforth shooting, Raptors' parade, etc.).
- Implementation of a re-integration program in spring 2018 to provide tailored support for staff returning to the workplace following an operational stress injury.

- Introduction of the part-time Paramedic classification in 2014 to permit operational flexibility in scheduling and reduce the need for full-time Paramedics to work additional hours. This has been an important priority for the City and Toronto Paramedic Services not only to improve ambulance availability, respond to call volumes and improve response times, but also to provide full-time staff with greater vacation and lieu-time opportunities, reducing the need for overtime and improving compliance with meal break requirements.
- Toronto Paramedic Services is continuing to pay normal wages to full-time Paramedics, who are asymptomatic and have been exposed to a probable case of COVID-19 – or who are showing symptoms consistent with COVID-19 and are on self-isolation – for the duration of the self-isolation period, without impact to their sick banks or other paid leave banks.
- Toronto Paramedic Services is continuing to pay all part-time Paramedics for pre-scheduled shifts during the period of self-isolation.
- In 2020, Toronto Paramedic Services held three virtual Town Hall Meetings for staff (April, June, October) to provide all employees with the opportunity to ask questions (in advance or live) of senior divisional staff.
- Under a specific Collective Agreement provision, Paramedics are afforded paid time out of service on Medical Stress Leave (MSL) from 1 hour up to two additional, consecutive 12-hour shifts following exposure to difficult or critical calls.
 - From 2019 to 2020, there was a 49% increase in MSL usage among Paramedics.

In addition, on April 6, 2016, the Ontario Government passed the *Supporting Ontario's First Responders Act*. This legislation created a presumption that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) diagnosed in first responders, is work-related. The *Act* requires the development of PTSD prevention plans by employers of workers who are covered by the presumption (see Psychological Health and Wellness Program above). From 2019 to 2020, there was a 22% increase in WSIB hours related to occupational stress among all Toronto Paramedic Services staff.

New Supports to Address Paramedic Mental Health, Wellness and Workload

As part of the 2021 Budget Process and following consultation with both TCEU Local 416 (CUPE) and People and Equity, Toronto Paramedic Services will be undertaking various further measures to support the mental health and wellness of all Paramedics.

- Continue to operate the Staff Support Centre implemented in March 2020 in order to ensure continued support for staff with concerns about COVID-19 related symptoms and absences.
- Continue to advocate for frontline Paramedics to receive the COVID-19 vaccination as a priority healthcare group.
- Provide additional consideration for doffing personal protective equipment (PPE) and for cleaning and disinfecting their ambulance after completion of an emergency call, as requested by the Paramedic, thereby helping to reduce workload stresses.

- Conduct discussions with TCEU Local 416 regarding feedback obtained by the TCEU Local 416 Rehab Representative to enhance existing return-to-work programming for frontline Paramedics.
- Continue to expand training for frontline Superintendents to enhance relationships with frontline staff.
- Subject to approval through the 2021 budget process, Toronto Paramedic Services will undertake a temporary conversion of part-time paramedics to full-time status. This conversion provides immediate support for staff pressures resulting from the pandemic. These pressures include added time in hospital due to hospital occupancy/healthcare system capacity and additional workload required by frontline Paramedics to perform proper infection prevention and cleaning. Such conversion will help to maintain service delivery while addressing the workload of all frontline paramedic staff.
- Subject to approval through the 2021 budget process, Toronto Paramedic Services recently received Provincial funding confirmation for expanded Community Paramedicine programming to support both the Home and Community Care sector and the Long-Term Care sector. Community Paramedicine Expansion to Support Home and Community Care (includes COVID-19 testing and vaccinations, support for clients returning home from scheduled hospital procedures) and the Community Paramedicine Expansion to Support those awaiting Long-Term Care placement are both programs that can help in mitigating emergency calls through the 9-1-1 system and reduce paramedic workload.
- Subject to approval through the 2021 budget process, Toronto Paramedic Services anticipates hiring 59 additional Paramedics in the fourth quarter of 2021 as part of the Multi-Year Staffing and Systems Plan which was approved by City Council in June 2019. Toronto Paramedic Services is planning for continued healthcare system capacity challenges as well as the return to normal activity due to the advancement of the vaccine roll-out for the general public. Specifically, this "normal" activity means more emergency calls due to the expected relaxing of public health measures, increased movement of people and vehicular traffic, re-opening of bars/restaurants, as well as the resumption of special events and large-scale gatherings in the fall of 2021.
- Toronto Paramedic Services will continue to meet on a quarterly basis, or as feasible, with the executive of the TCEU Local 416 Paramedic Unit to address the ongoing mental health, wellness and workload concerns of Paramedics.

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