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20-per-cent spike in paramedic calls in Halton amid flu outbreak

By Mark McNeil
Metroland Media Group

One of the worst flu seasons in memory has been wreaking havoc with paramedic services in Halton, according to a new report.

Paramedics have been facing a double whammy of a 20-per-cent increase in calls over the past month while jammed emergency departments mean they have to wait longer to off-load patients before they can get back on the road again.

It means ambulances have been needed more and less available. Extra vehicles have been put on the road at a not-yet-calculated cost that the region hopes will be picked up by the province at a later date.

This is one of the worst flu seasons that I have seen, said Greg Sage, the chief director of paramedic services for Halton.

He said flu, norovirus and other seasonal illnesses have increased demand for ambulance services while making fewer beds available in hospital for incoming patients.

A report to Halton regional council said from Dec. 13, 2016 until Jan. 10, 2017, there were 42 periods where less than four ambulances were available for the entire region and four periods where zero ambulances were available due to ambulance off load delays.

Sage said other municipalities in the area have been facing a similar onslaught because of increases in cases of flu and other viruses.

Mario Posteraro, president of Ontario Public Service Employees Union Local 256, which represents Hamilton's paramedics said, there has been a contingency plan put in place by the chief on a short-term basis to deal with the increase in call volume two ambulances on the day shift and one on the night shift.

But he argued it was a Band-Aid measure to deal with a chronic problem of understaffing made worse at this time of year.

In Halton, Sage said, over the last few days calls have fallen back to more normal levels, but he said it is impossible to say whether that trend will continue.

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