

Region, paramedics headed for mediation

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Special to The IFP

Contract talks for Halton paramedics have broken down and are headed for mediation, with wage and benefit parity cited as key issues.

OPSEU Local 207 announced on Wednesday that negotiations had reached an impasse.

The union's paramedics have been without a contract since Dec. 31, 2006, but no major job actions are planned, said an OPSEU staff representative.

"We're not allowed to strike and work-to-rule is not an option we want to exercise," said Pati Habermann. "We could raise awareness by doing an information picket, but it depends on how mediation goes."

She said Halton paramedics' wages are behind their counterparts in Toronto, Hamilton and Peel.

"There's a big difference between Halton wages and Toronto wages," said Habermann. "There are the same requirements with respect to the skills set and expectations of performance."

For Halton paramedics (as of 2006), top hourly wages are \$30 and hour for Primary Care Paramedics (PCP) and \$33.49 an hour for Advanced Care Paramedics (ACP).

Comparable figures are \$35.30 and \$37.07 for Toronto and \$31.94 and \$35.65 for Hamilton. These wages are as of 2008.

In Peel (as of 2006), comparable wages for paramedics are \$30 and \$33.60.

"Our members want and deserve a timely agreement containing wage rates and benefits that respects the important and challenging work they perform," said Habermann.

Halton has 101 full-time and 31 part-time land ambulance paramedics providing emergency care and basic life support, such as Cardio-Pulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) and first aid. All are qualified to drive the ambulances.

Habermann said advance paramedics are also

able to administer some medications.

The union representative believes both sides want to reach a settlement without going to binding arbitration.

"There's definitely space in between what they're offering and what we're proposing," said Habermann. "It's not huge, but we've got some work to do."

She said Halton has added two new vehicles but is not hiring enough new paramedics.

"Halton itself is growing and we need to get more cars and more full-time paramedics."

The union representative said another concern is off-loading delays, where paramedics have to wait at the hospital until the patient is under doctor's care.

"Sometimes we have four or five vehicles waiting at hospitals," said Habermann. "It cuts into working time and the paramedics are not available for other calls. We have to bring in ambulances from other services."

Habermann said it could take a year to get to arbitration.

A Halton spokesperson said both sides are coming up with meeting dates and will then find an mediator.

"We'll use the mediator as best we can," said John Phelan, Halton's director of human resources.

He noted an arbitration process would require agreement on the arbitrator, scheduling and conducting an arbitration hearing and waiting for the arbitrator's report.

Phelan declined to answer some questions, citing the region's protocol of not discussing contract issues in the media.

Phelan noted the Region approved hiring the full-time equivalent of 10.4 new paramedics for 2008.

He added there's no danger of a strike by paramedics and their service levels are mandated by law.

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