

## Halton Paramedic Services get serious about workplace mental health

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When the unimaginable happens, paramedics are among the first responders on the scene.

Bus crashes, like the one that killed 16 people in

Saskatchewan, or the recent van attack in Toronto are examples of how everyday, paramedics are faced with circumstances that put them at risk for developing post traumatic stress disorder.

In response to a growing

need for mental health supports for first responders, Halton Region has partnered with the Canadian Standards Association to develop a set of guidelines to protect paramedics.

"We've got a new standard that's unique to paramedicine," said Kevin Flynn, Ontario's labour minister, who came out to the unveiling of the new policy. "I hope it becomes an example to first responders."

Flynn says that he came into his position with the mandate to work on mental health issues in the workplace.

"I've never seen an issue take hold in the public psyche so quickly," he said, talking about awareness about mental health issues and reducing the stigma.

"The advocacy for paramedics in Halton and Onta-

rio has helped get us to where we are today," he said.

The standard is a framework developed by a team of professionals in paramedicine, with the help of the Canadian Standards Association.

The 83-page document sets out the ways to identify stressors in the workplace that can lead to poorer mental health, crisis situations, and what to do if an employee starts exhibiting the signs of depression, anxiety, PTSD or any other mental illness.

The policy talks about

the steps employers should take to keep workers in the workplace, as well as a system to uphold a healthy work-life balance, and to utilize family, and the external community in bolstering mental health support.

"Staff are exposed to operational stress injuries," said Halton Paramedic Services Chief Greg Sage, "We really encourage them to keep an eye on each other."

He says the standard builds on policies that the first responders already have in place.

"It's just one more tool in

the toolbox," said Sage.

For paramedics like Vanessa Vis, the policy is an important step in recognizing the struggles that paramedics face.

In any given week, over 500,000 Canadians will miss time from work due to mental health struggles and paramedics are a disproportionately affected population.

"To have awareness of it is definitely important," she said, adding that the framework will help staff to "take care of each other and watch out for those signs and symptoms."

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The Canadian Standards Association has developed a framework for paramedic services to tackle mental health issues and address factors that put paramedics at risk for developing disorders like PTSD, depression and anxiety.



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