



## Halton Service costs residents \$1.6 million to keep in operation

In 1967 the Ambulance Services Branch was created by the Ontario Ministry of Health and the Ontario Ambulance Act was passed, specifying government standards.

A year later, ambulance services throughout the province became subsidized 100 per cent by the government in an effort to provide improved uniform service.

Prior to the formation of the Halton-Mississauga Company in 1974, the local service was run by Milton District Hospital.

"You could look at us as a private management service," said Al Duffin, operation manager.

The Ontario government looks after the rental of stations, assets and furnishings, vehicles and basic equipment, in addition to the wages for 50 driver-attendants, four dispatchers and 11 supervisors and management staff.

The company looks after the maintenance of vehicles and purchases of supplies including uniforms.

The 1979-1980 budget for the Halton-Mississauga Ambulance Co. totalled \$1,634,619.

This year's budget is expected to exceed that figure, though a final calculation has yet to be worked out.

The company now operates on a global budget which means funds allocated and not spent by the company are returned to the ministry.

Prior to last April, the private company which included five shareholders was permitted to make a profit, above the salary of management staff.

That has all changed, according to Richard Armstrong, regional co-ordinator of the ministry branch.

"It was an experiment that didn't work out as well as we intended," he said in reference to the profit-permitted venture.

"There were definite problems in monitoring expenses and we felt it was in the taxpayers' best interests to change."

Mr. Armstrong refused to disclose the salaries of the three management personnel, despite the fact the company is 100 per cent funded by tax dollars.

The Ministry of Health makes one annual formal inspection of the company and government co-ordinators pay visits two or three times a month.

Ambulance vehicles are checked every six months. Ministry takeover of the services has led to considerable improvement in standards, according to Mr. Duffin.

Training for driver-attendants has been upgraded and all employees are now required to enroll in an emergency casualty attendant course offered at Humber and Sheridan Colleges.

The course covers anatomy, physiology, physics, rescue, and defensive driving and includes a restricted radio telephone licence.

Driver-attendants must now pass a provincial examination based on the course to remain employed.

Cost of the course is \$150 for staff and the company allows time off for the course to be taken.

An attendant starting with the company can expect to make \$6.73 an hour with top wage for attendants with four years or more experience at \$7.94 an hour.

Company benefits include 100 per cent payment of OHIP, a drug and medical plan, dental insurance, life insurance and a long term disability plan, as well as a weekly indemnity plan.

Stories by Linda Kirby

## Champion Perspective

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# Emergency: Ambulance service covers 600 miles, 500,000 people

Ambulance service in Ontario has come a long way in the past 12 years.

Years ago, it was not uncommon for a small private company to operate out of a garage with one telephone.

"In many areas, it was extremely primitive and people were fighting for service," according to Al Duffin, operation manager of the Halton-Mississauga Ambulance Company.

Milton, previously looked after by a small service run from Milton District Hospital, is one of several communities now handled by the company.

The operation of the service covers an area of 600 square miles to include a population of 500,000 people with boundaries extending from Etobicoke Creek on the east to Highway Six on the west side, south to Oakville and north to Milton.

Six emergency lines cover Milton, Lorne Park, Cooksville, Oakville, Burlington and Streetsville. All are reached under one number 844-4242.

When an emergency call is made to the Oakville company headquarters, the dispatcher immediately

radios the closest station.

The ambulance service area is divided into 10 square mile lots and further subdivided into one mile square blocks and coded.

Every square mile has a number in each of the four corners, therefore pinpointing a location.

A highly organized process goes into effect once each call is received.

All emergency calls are automatically recorded and a computerized dispatch card notes the time a call is received; when the crew is notified; departure from the station; and arrival at the scene and subsequent departure.

A "tacograph" provides a 24-hour daily log on the speed of every ambulance covering each call. This record is vital in the event of an accident, or the need to check if an ambulance was unduly speeding.

There are two additional radio channels that include a channel used by the Halton service and an ambulance company in Hamilton, also covering St. Catharines and Welland; and a provincial channel used by ambulance services across the province to

contact each other.

"It can get quite congested," admitted company dispatcher Noel O'Connor.

Time is the crucial factor in any ambulance operation.

According to Mr. Dufferin, the average response time for an ambulance in Ontario is between 10 and 11 minutes.

The Halton company boasts an average response time of eight minutes.

"There are times during extremely bad weather when it will take us longer," he admitted, "but we cope and do the best possible."

Screaming, racing ambulances are rare, according to Mr. Duffin.

With today's modern equipment, attendants can stabilize patients and are rarely required to step on the gas, he said, noting high-speed rides are generally frowned upon.

Company rules permit drivers to exceed the speed limit by 25 km an hour, but travelling any faster necessitates a written explanation.

"Ten or 15 years ago we had to allow for speeding, because attendants were not as well trained in the medical sense to look after patients," he said.

Although there are established ambulance stations with specific crews, the company will shift any of its nine vehicles to different locations when necessary.

A map is issued every six months depicting the number of calls and the frequency of calls in every district.

Based on the amount and location of the calls, ambulances are moved accordingly.

The majority of calls received in any city is usually in the older residential area, according to Mr. Duffin.

Should a municipality become saturated with calls or involved in a major accident, another vehicle is moved into that area from a neighboring region and surrounding cars are moved to cover all bases.

The Halton-Mississauga Ambulance Company is also the "secondary support" for Toronto International Airport, to help during airline disasters if needed.

The company recently acquired an emergency support unit for that purpose.

Equipped with three radios including CB, the unit comes with 20 stretchers and supplies for several medical teams.

Like any other public service, the company has its share of annoying problems.

These include a regular number of false calls, comprising between five and seven per cent of all calls.

An ambulance ride now costs \$40, with half the tab picked up by OHIP.

But should an ambulance be called for a "non-essential", need such as transporting an individual for a doctor's appointment, patients can expect to pay for the whole shot.

Mr. Duffin rates the company and Ontario ambulance services as the best in the world.

American cities often use two or three different services, but with less efficiency than their northern neighbors, he said.

## Ambulance attendants must tackle everything

Ambulance attendants are rarely portrayed as heroes, and usually the last to receive recognition for their efforts.

They are the first at accident scenes. They're the ones who must sort through the mangled wrecks in the hope of saving the life of an accident victim.

They are usually the first on the doorstep of a reported domestic dispute and sometimes walk into face the menacing shotgun of an angry husband.

They are the ones who must answer rape and suicide calls.

They are witnesses to the worst of life.

"Human life is the ultimate responsibility.

"Each person is an individual and you do the best you can to help them," explained Marcel Zwolman, a Milton ambulance attendant with the Halton-Mississauga Ambulance Co.

The 27-year-old attendant has been on the job for the past eight years.

Dealing with sickness and death is not easy, he admits.

"You feel emotions, but you can't show them. You sympathize, but you must have control," he said.

An interest in medicine and people prompted the former welder to join the ambulance company.

He had basic first-aid instruction and enrolled in a two-year college course.

The job has proven satisfying, he said, but he admits there are few heroic, life-saving rescues.

"Very seldom do we restore life.

"We are mostly confronted with sickness or death," he said.

Ambulance attendants, however, often face dangers similar to those

experienced by police officers.

In the case of a domestic dispute, it will frequently be up to an attendant to talk his way into a house, past an angry husband to look after an injured wife.

Most ambulance crews are affected by what they must deal with, particularly when it comes to young children, said Mr. Zwolman, but training helps to keep their emotions in check.

Children, he noted, are often the bravest accident victims.

He recalls an eight-year-old Campbellville boy who lost a leg in a train accident, but shed no tears as ambulance attendants rushed him to hospital.

A grown man, however, will "bawl his eyes out" over a small cut, said Mr. Zwolman.

There are obvious pressures as a result of the emotional rigors of

the job.

Every case is confidential and the daily happenings are not something one can easily discuss at home.

"You try to shut the door on work, but some days you have had a bad day—and it shows," he said.

Forgetting about the job after hours is not always simple. There are the late night calls and early morning requests to attend autopsies or work extra hours during busy periods.

"Our job does not end right on cue.

"Even if you go by an accident after hours, you feel obliged to stop.

"You want to do whatever you can," he said.

That personal conviction to help whenever possible resulted in Mr. Zwolman receiving a life-saving award for his part in

saving a life last May.

Recognition of the efforts of ambulance crews often goes unnoticed, he said.

"Newspapers always mention firefighters and the police.

"But the ambulance has usually come and gone and nothing is mentioned of them," he said.

Benefits of the job include an appreciation for "life and the good things," he suggested.

"You value a good home life and your friends."

His line of work is rarely the topic of discussion between neighbors and friends.

"When you go out, you want to forget all about it," he said.

He admits he has debated changing his job, but he does enjoy his work.

"I wouldn't stay in it if I didn't care."



On the scene: Milton Ambulance Attendant Marcel Zwolman, at left of step, has been on job for eight years. There are many pressures associated with the job, he admits. He decided to join the Halton-Mississauga Ambulance Company because "people and medicine interest me".



The Ambulance Switchboard. It represents the beehive of the organization, where all emergency calls are received covering a 600-acre square mile area. One of four dispatchers, Noel O'Connor admits the job can become extremely hectic at any given time.