

Ambulance service to be enhanced with more staff

By IRENE GENTLE

The Champion

Injecting the recently downloaded ambulance service with more cash could save lives, regional council decided Wednesday.

It voted to beef up the service through additional ambulances, higher trained staff and improved equipment.

A report providing an implementation plan and firm figures for the proposed enhancements is due out in February, 2000.

Halton's ambulance service has not been plumped up since 1985, though its call volume has doubled since that time.

But downloading has allowed the Region to rescue the sagging system, said Burlington Councillor John Taylor.

"We have a tremendous opportunity here today to enhance the ambulance service," he said.

"You can't double the amount of calls with the same resources and have the same results."

One way to improve the system is to increase the number of Advanced Life Support paramedics, which receive extra life-saving training, to 65 per cent of the labour force.

More ambulances to come

Another is to add more ambulances.

Today, a dearth of vehicles contribute to decreased response times in the region, said Halton's land ambulance director Jim King.

He pointed that only one of Halton's six ambulance stations has not fallen behind its 1996 response time.

And even the speediest response time in Halton lags behind the unofficial North American standard of 8:59 minutes.

Response times illustrate when an ambulance arrives on the scene 90 per cent of the time.

According to recent studies, getting a defibrillator — or heart paddle — to the scene within eight minutes helps save the lives of cardiac patients.

And that is borne out in Burlington, where the percentage of lives saved jumped from 2.9 per cent to 6.8 per cent since defibrillators came on to the scene, said Mr. King.

But even Burlington West, which is Halton's fastest station,

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JOHN TAYLOR

had a response time of 9:35 minutes.

Halton's slowest response time was in Milton, with ambulances here limping to the scene in 14.20 minutes 90 per cent of the time.

"Right now we have a 14 minute response time in Milton, but you're dead in 10," said Milton Councillor Rick Malboeuf.

"If you're a witness to a cardiac arrest in Milton, the best thing you can do is bend them over so they can kiss their butt good-bye."

In 1999, ambulance service cost \$5,310,200, which is split 50-50 between the Region and the Province.

But enhancements such as increased staffing, upgrading to ALS status and new stations would add approximately \$2,646,000 to that tab.

Additional one-time expenditures for equipment, including defibrillators, would plump that up by another \$1,626,000.

That cost would be spread over two or three years.

But all those improvements would only add another \$12 to the ambulance portion of the average taxpayers bill, which is calculated as the owner of a \$185,000 home, Council learned.

Currently, Halton residents pay \$15.66 for ambulance services.

And that can be contrasted to \$279 for police services, said Mr. Taylor.

"It's only \$12 to significantly improve the safety of the community and I think it's worth every cent," he added.

Dennison not convinced

But that \$12 figure isn't fair, since \$185,000 homes are few and far between, countered Burlington Councillor Jack Dennison.

"Twelve dollars is a mythical average," he said. "I don't think I have many of them in Ward 4."

He said he would be scrutinizing the February report for proof that throwing money at the system will lead to service improvements.

But bringing more ambulances into the region will cover more ground, helping response times, said Mr. King.

And that's priceless, said Local 207 president of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union Gord Armes.

"I would say what is the cost of a life? To put a dollar figure on a life, I wouldn't want to do it," he said. "I don't think anyone on council would like to do it either."

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