

No ambulances were available on one or two recent occasions

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just over an hour.

On one or two occasions since December, no ambulances were available for emergency calls, Sage explained. Last Friday, only one out of 13 ambulances were ready for a call.

Emergency plans are in place for situations like this, and include sending out emergency response units staffed by supervisors and managers until an ambulance is available. Vehicles from surrounding areas are also deployed, but they're frequently unable to help because of their own offloading delays, committee heard.

Since 2001, Halton EMS's response time has been below the mandated standard.

The potential for delayed response times is serious, Sage said.

"We know from research that a timely response has a significant impact on patient survival," Sage said.

He told the Champion he's not sure why the delays start-

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COLIN BEST

ed in December, and that it's probably a combination of factors including fuller hospitals due to the onset of flu season.

In December, 825 hours of offload delay were recorded, with 812 hours in January, the report reads.

"This amount of time is equivalent to more than two ambulances being out of service for an entire 12-hour shift every day during the months of December and January," it states.

Milton Councillor Colin Best said the situation is concerning.

"I find it incredible that a highly trained staff (member) is sitting there waiting on a patient," he said.

In January 2006, Health and Long-Term Care Minister George Smitherman announced an investment of \$96 million to reduce such delays and wait times in emergency rooms.

Regional Chairman Gary Carr said the back-up at hospitals, which is affecting ambulances, is just one of the reasons why the Fairness for Halton campaign is so important. The initiative aims to raise awareness about the funds that will be needed to make way for the 300,000-plus residents the Province's Places to Grow plan designates for Halton — funds that'll be particularly needed for area hospitals.

"Unless the Province addresses our concerns with the Places to Grow Plan, offloading delays at hospitals will continue to get worse with our growing communities," Carr said. "We cannot have a strain on the system as it is not acceptable for our residents and these delays compromise the quality of life that Halton residents deserve and expect."

Carr said the situation at Milton District Hospital is particularly critical.

He asked if offloading delays are worse at certain Halton hospitals, and Sage replied that the delays at Joseph Brant Hospital in Burlington are less frequent but longer than at the others.

Delays stressful to EMS staff

Not only are offloading delays potentially dangerous to patients, they also create a stressful environment for Halton EMS staff, who find themselves on the go pretty much their entire 12-hour shift and who frequently miss meal breaks, Sage said.

In an effort to address the offloading delays, regional council approved a motion Wednesday that calls for Carr to write a letter to Smitherman asking for patient destination software to be implemented at the Mississauga Central Ambulance Communications Centre.

The City of Toronto EMS developed the software in 2004. It lets paramedics know which hospital is best to offload patients, in turn avoiding many ambulances transporting patients to the same hospital.

"This software would be available to the Province from the City of Toronto at no cost and would assist in alleviating some of the delay times," said Carr. "If this software assists us in improving our services to our residents, its implementation makes perfect sense and the Province should consider this."

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