

No holiday for region's essential service workers

BY CHRIS TRABER
ctraber@yrmg.com

'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.

The same can't be said for York Region's hospitals and police, fire and ambulance stations.

For our essential service professionals, the holidays can be a misnomer. Emergencies don't take vacations. Either do those entrusted to be vigilant.

Still, for those working holiday shifts, traditions, when time allows, are welcome.

Fire Station 97 on Main Street in Markham is staffed 24/7 by a four-person crew. While fire department workers represent all faiths, firefighter Chris Beaumont's team celebrates Christmas.

"It can be a bit sad because you're not with your family, but that's the commitment you make when you take the job," he said.

To take the melancholic edge off, the crew prepares a special meal and may indulge in an extra treat routinely delivered by neighbours. Some stations have decorated trees and secret Santa gift exchanges. Many fire chiefs, active and retired, will have meals deliv-

ered for their crews during the festive season.

In the spirit of the Yuletide, Station 97 conducts a toy drive.

"Our lobby fills up every day," Mr. Beaumont. "We're very community oriented."

This will be the first Christmas in four years, he will be spending the day with his three pre-teenage children.

'It can be a bit sad because you're not with your family, but that's the commitment you make when you take the job.'

Rookie firefighter Heather Elchuk, 26, isn't as fortunate. Her duties will prevent her from spending Christmas with her family, including six siblings, in her hometown of Priceville, ON.

"It's not too bad," she said. "Our crew is very close. It's an extended family, like a new set of brothers. During the holidays, we spend a little extra time around the table, if we can, winding down, talking."

Capt. Jim Jones has spent his share of holidays on the job during

a 32-year career. Often, he'll arrange for holiday meals to be delivered and will host staff parties at his home.

Similarly, Southlake Regional Health Centre's birthing, pediatric and emergency departments run around the clock, spokesperson Tammy La Rue said.

Christmas babies are all given festive hats and themed quilts, donated from the Quilt Shop. Nurses play Santa and deliver donated toys to each child's bed Christmas morning.

Emergency Room staff arrange a special dinner on Christmas and New Year's Day, where everyone brings their favourite dishes.

They set the table like a festive meal and have non-alcoholic drinks, Ms La Rue said. "The staff try to do two breaks only, so more people can share the meal together, however you never know what might come through the door."

Southlake president Dan Carriere's tradition is to visit the hospital on Christmas Day and wish all working staff a Merry Christmas.

About 100 of the region's 400 emergency medical service staff will be at their posts and in their ambulances this weekend, EMS superintendent Louise Lorenc said. With call volumes particularly high

during holidays, it's rare crews can relax over a leisurely meal, she said.

With a 12-hour shift starting at 6 a.m., it can be tough on EMS workers with families waiting at home.

Paramedics are kept busy when snow and alcohol translate into collisions, slips and falls. The holidays can be emotionally delicate and difficult, Ms Lorenc said, noting Christmas and Valentine's Day traditionally see a spike in suicide and domestic assault calls.

With a 12-hour shift starting at 6 a.m., it can be tough on EMS workers with families waiting at home.

"It's hard to see the things that go on during the holidays," she said.

EMS staff light up shelters and hospital wards on Christmas Eve, distributing blankets and toy bears to kids, she said.

Post Christmas and Thanksgiving holidays are euphemistically called Salmonella Mondays by EMS insiders, she said. As a result of people eating improperly stored leftovers, a flood of food poisoning

calls are answered.

A significant portion of York Region Police is also on duty at Christmas, community services inspector Maria Ahrens said. Officers, civilian, communications and records staff support the region's 34 platoons.

Though it's business as usual, each district has holiday decorations and commanders traditionally make the rounds, wishing staff season's greetings. Day and evening shifts enjoy pot luck meals with R.I.D.E. crews called in on rotating shifts to participate.

With varied faiths and cultures represented on the force, prayer rooms are available in each district for staff use.

Leading up to the holidays, police host food and toy drives with a multi-faith event at the Community Safety Village. They also organize Holiday Heroes, a toy collection in partnership with community groups and businesses.

The nature of their work subjects essential service personnel to disturbing scenes.

"We love doing our job," Mr. Beaumont said. "At this time of the year, you hate to see someone having a bad day on a fire or medical call. Of all days, a Christmas tragedy is the worst."

In Our Community



Dave Darling, Store Manager and Jean Miljevic, District Manager stand in front of the crowds of people who visited the new Food Basics at Highway 48, just south of Major Mackenzie Drive. This new Food Basics opened its doors to the public on Wednesday December 8, 2010 with line-ups of people awaiting entry to the new store. The new Food Basics address is 1220 Castlemore Ave. in Markham.

STAKEOUT

Dining Room & Lounge
SPECIALIZING IN STEAKS & SEAFOOD

The time has come to start looking for that one amazing evening that will help you usher in the year 2011 in a way which you will never forget. The ultimate combination of style, class and sheer elegance as Stouffville's Stakeout Dining Room & Lounge brings you a night to remember.

COME JOIN US FOR

NEW YEARS EVE

Join us for an elegant meal, champagne, party favours and entertainment the way only the Stakeout Dining Room & Lounge can bring you.

LIVE ENTERTAINMENT

BRIAN ROMAN

Enjoy our live entertainment during and after your meal, from 8pm on. It will be a night to remember!



WWW.BRIANROMAN.COM

5402 MAIN ST., STOUFFVILLE



RESERVATIONS
905.642.5557

WWW.STAKEOUTDINING.COM