

Information Report



To Chair and Members of the Social Services Committee

From Stephen Dewar, Chief and General Manager, Guelph-Wellington Paramedic Service

Date June 8, 2022

Subject **Paramedic Service Offload Delays Update**

Executive Summary

Purpose of Report

To provide Committee with an update on hospital offload delays and the impact that it is having on the services provided by Guelph Wellington Paramedic Service.

Key Findings

Hospital offload delays continue to affect the number of paramedic ambulances available to respond to emergencies in the community and the related response times. Guelph-Wellington Paramedic Service is working with the Guelph General hospital and has enacted some mitigation strategies; however, they are only partially effective. Staff continue to work to find additional solutions.

Report

Hospital Offload Delays are a problem affecting many paramedic services in Ontario. The instances of offload delays at Guelph General Hospital were historically rare but increased significantly beginning in August of 2021.

The issue involves the transfer of care to a patient in the hospital emergency department. On entering a hospital, paramedics must provide a report to a responsible staff member who then assumes care for their patient. The Provincial Ministry of Health set a standard that indicates that this transfer should occur within 30 minutes of the ambulance arriving at the hospital, 90 percent of the time. When hospital staff are not able to assume care for the patient, paramedics are required to continue to provide that care and are unavailable to respond to further emergency calls. This circumstance is referred to as an offload delay.

As reported to this Committee in March 2022, Guelph Wellington Paramedics were delayed (beyond the 30-minute transfer time) at the Guelph General Hospital for more than 4,800 hours in 2021. This trend has continued and increased, and as of the end of April the paramedic service has lost an additional 2,600 hours to offload

delays. These delays are occurring virtually daily, with the longest delay being over 12 hours.

When paramedics are delayed in the emergency department the number of ambulances available to respond to emergency calls is reduced, and available ambulances are strategically spaced to provide optimal emergency coverage. This results in longer response times as ambulances need to travel further to reach the scene of an emergency.

GWPS uses a threshold of less than four available ambulances in Guelph and Wellington County as an alert level, and in the month of May 2022, we reached that threshold approximately 3 times every day. Included in those episodes were two events where no Guelph Wellington ambulances were available to respond, sometimes referred to in the media as 'Code Red' events. The longer of these was 16 minutes.

Causes of Offload Delays

Staff have been working with our peers at the Guelph General hospital to understand, minimize and attempt to mitigate the impacts of offload delays on our paramedics and the community. From those discussions we understand that the root causes of the increase in offload delays include a shortage of Long-Term Care beds in the community, causing patients who require LTC housing to remain in hospital until a bed can be found. This creates a shortage of beds for patients in the emergency department who need to be admitted to the hospital and the resulting shortage of beds for patients entering the department by ambulance. The shortage of LTC beds may be related to changes that occurred because of the COVID pandemic.

A second potential cause of a shortage of beds in the hospital includes a shortage of medical staff available in the community, so that where in the past post-surgical patients may have, in the past, been discharged with complex care being arranged in their homes these patients must now stay in hospital for longer periods of time.

Mitigation Efforts

In early 2022 the Guelph General Hospital began using a clause in our deployment strategy to declare an internal emergency, which resulted in our service transporting patients to the next closest available hospital. In this process, there were some cases where we transported patients from the City of Guelph to Palmerston and District hospital for emergency care. This process was discontinued in consideration of patient safety and wellbeing.

Specific to the issues at Guelph General Hospital and as reported in March, we have worked with the hospital to apply for funding to hire nursing staff to care specifically for patients on offload delay. Following a report to this committee and to Guelph City Council in March, a letter signed by Warden Linton and Mayor Guthrie was sent to the Ministry of Health advocating for this funding and assistance with this issue in general. GWPS staff along with hospital staff did meet with Assistant Deputy Minister of Health Susan Picarello about this application but were advised that the application could not be approved until after the Provincial

election. Staff also met with MPPs Ted Arnot and Mike Schreiner on the issue prior to the election being called asking for their intervention.

In more recent meetings with the Guelph General hospital, they have suggested that they are considering and working on logistics for hiring staff to care for offload patients in advance of the Provincial funding, and the potential of opening some additional beds in the hospital to address the shortage.

As an interim step, GWPS has begun a process where paramedics in offload delay transfer care of their patients to other paramedics already in delay, and those paramedics assume care for more than one patient at a time. This process, referred to as Batching, presents many logistical challenges and is not appropriate for all patients but does provide some partial relief in the absence of other solutions.

As further mitigation efforts, GWPS continues to maintain and utilize the Community Paramedicine program, which has been shown to reduce the number of emergencies experienced by identified high-risk patients.

Guelph Wellington Paramedic Services and City of Guelph staff are continuing to monitor the Offload Delay situation and the impacts on the paramedic service and the community, and all possible mitigation strategies are being considered. An update is scheduled to be provided to the City of Guelph Committee of the Whole on July 4, 2022.

Respectfully Submitted by:



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