

The Regional Municipality of York

Committee of the Whole
Community and Health Services
September 9, 2021

Report of the Commissioner of Community and Health Services

Preventing Impacts of Violence Towards York Region Paramedics

1. Recommendations

1. The Regional Chair, on behalf of Regional Council, send this report to the Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, and communicate Council's request that the *Criminal Code of Canada* be amended to provide protection for paramedics and to make violence against paramedics an indictable criminal offence.
2. The Regional Clerk provide a copy of this report to the Members of Provincial Parliament and Members of Parliament representing York Region requesting their support to advocate for amendments to the *Criminal Code of Canada* to provide protection for paramedics and to make violence against paramedics an indictable criminal offence.
3. The Regional Clerk circulate this report for information to the Paramedic Chiefs of Canada, Ontario Association of Paramedic Chiefs, Association of Municipalities of Ontario, the Regions of Peel, Halton and Durham, and to the Cities of Toronto and Hamilton.

2. Summary

This report provides Council with an update on current measures underway by Paramedic Services to understand and address the complexity of workplace safety issues paramedics face on the job. It also highlights actions underway to prevent and mitigate the effects of violence against paramedics and discusses next steps for developing actions to address violence and advocacy opportunities.

Key Points:

- York Region paramedics are exposed to violence while providing patient care; however, due to under-reporting, the full extent of the issue is not fully known
- Paramedic Services is taking a multi-step approach to address violence against paramedics on the job
- Regional Council support is needed to build public awareness of the issue, advance efforts to address system level changes and advocate for legislative changes to the Minister of Justice to strengthen protections for paramedics

3. Background

In January 2021, Regional Council requested an update on the status of violence against York Region Paramedic Services

In January 2021, Council received the Region of Peel's report, [Eliminating Violence Against Paramedics – A Call to Action](#), which highlighted measures underway in Peel to advance system-level changes to reduce violence against paramedics and advocacy to the federal government to amend Canada's Criminal Code to make legislative changes to protect paramedics. Council received this report and requested staff provide further information on the issue of violence against paramedics in York Region.

Paramedics are exposed to violence while providing patient care which can take a toll on their overall well-being and personal lives

Paramedics are exposed to incidents of violence (e.g. verbal abuse, physical assault and/or sexual harassment) on the job by patients, their families or bystanders. Over the course of a career, paramedics may experience incidents of violence several times which can take a toll on their mental health, their career and their personal life. This can lead to longer-term psychological effects such as changes in mood, fear for personal safety, post-traumatic stress injury and decreases in job satisfaction. Further, the impact on the Service can result in reduced staffing due to protracted absenteeism, illness, or injury; increased costs due to additional workplace safety and insurance board claims; as well as potential impacts to providing effective patient care. A [2020 study](#) conducted by the Paramedic Chiefs of Canada found that 88% of surveyed frontline paramedics across Canada had experienced workplace violence in the last 12 months. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has added pressures on individuals and communities which has increased the potential for violence directed at paramedics in their interactions with the public.

A clearer understanding of the circumstances behind violence is needed. However, under-reporting and/or lack of reporting is a significant challenge common to the profession. Violence has become so commonplace that paramedics may accept it as an unavoidable work hazard or brush it off and make light of the situation. A [2019 study](#) completed by Peel Region Paramedic Services found that lack of reporting is because paramedics may not believe there is any recourse available to them or consequences for the perpetrator, who is often the patient they are trying to help.

4. Analysis

In York Region, cases of violence against paramedics are under-reported

In 2020, York Region's complement of paramedics was 605. Paramedics reported 18 cases of violence during the course of their duties, though it is believed the true number of incidents are under-reported. Creating dedicated space for staff to speak about violence is new; however, early discussions reveal there is a sense that paramedics are experiencing violence and there is a collective tolerance that it is part of the job. These incidents include paramedics being

physically assaulted, sexually harassed, and verbally abused with threats of violence as well as racist and sexist comments.

The lack of awareness of the increasing prevalence of violence experienced by York Region paramedics is a contributing factor to it becoming a more common occurrence. Greater attention and understanding of this issue are needed as a first step in making positive change.

Paramedic Services surveyed staff on the 15 Psychosocial Factors of Health and Safety in the Workplace to identify sources of stress on the job

In January 2020, Paramedic Services surveyed staff members to identify sources of stress on the job. Four hundred and eight York Region Paramedic Services staff members participated (response rate of 67%) in a voluntary, confidential survey that gathered feedback on the 15 Psychosocial Factors identified in the [National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace](#). The Standard addresses workplace risk factors that impact mental health including critical incident response management, suicide awareness and prevention, providing mental health and wellness resources and prevention of violence in the workplace.

York Region Paramedic Services was the first paramedic service in Canada to complete this survey. At this time, no benchmarks have been established. The data collected from this survey will serve as a baseline for future surveys.

Survey results indicate that violence against paramedics or the threat of harm is a source of on-the-job stress

Survey respondents were asked questions to identify sources of stress and psychological hazards on the job. Of the 408 staff survey responses, results show that:

- Less than 65% either strongly or somewhat agreed the frequency and severity of exposure to critical events are monitored to determine the cumulative impact and mitigate associated risks
- Less than 60% either strongly or somewhat agreed that all staff are respectful and considerate in their interactions with one another, as well as with patients, family members and the public
- 50% either strongly or somewhat agreed that psychological risk and the impact on health and wellbeing are assessed and addressed in job design and organizational change
- Less than 40% either strongly or somewhat agreed that exposure to stressful situations is monitored and mitigated

Respondents also identified the following key areas of opportunity to prevent sources of stress on the job impacting staff well-being:

- Monitor compassion fatigue, burnout and demonstrating support for work-life balance

- Learn about and limit the impact of chronic stressors
- Explore effective ways of addressing inappropriate behaviour by coworkers, patients, patients' family members or the public

The survey results provide an understanding of chronic stressors paramedics experience and are being used to plan how to better support the psychological health and safety of paramedics. As a next step, Paramedic Services is undertaking a series of actions, including staff led focus groups, to support measures to address on the job violence.

Paramedic Services is taking a multi-step approach to address violence against paramedics on the job

Paramedic Services is taking steps to create awareness and support system-level changes that can reduce external violence against paramedics on the job by collaborating with allied partners and making improvements within the organization. The following actions are currently underway:

- **Collaborating with York Region Police through an Interoperability Committee:**

Paramedic Services is working with York Region Police to develop a framework to support a structured, collaborative approach to improve communication, and familiarity of operational protocols between both organizations to foster a better understanding of responsibilities and safer working conditions.

Priorities for this collaboration include raising awareness of operational issues impacting paramedic safety, improving emergent response communications between police and paramedics and implementing operational process improvements involving high risk interactions with the public.

- **Enhanced paramedic professional development:** Paramedics do not receive the same level of training or equipment as police do for preventing or responding to violent occurrences. To address this, the Region is working with York Regional Police and York Region Employee Health to develop an educational plan that identifies gaps in training to support paramedics. The education will focus on paramedic safety improvements such as de-escalation techniques, self-defence, staging and safe approach to calls, non-physical crisis intervention approaches, and clinically focused management of persons in crisis.
- **Hosting staff-led focus groups:** Focus groups have been established to seek input and empower frontline paramedics to share their experiences, lessons learned and recommended strategies for improvement to support development of the actions.
- **Improving incident reporting for staff:** Paramedic Services is working to continue to improve the process for paramedics to report violent incidents to help better track incidents and provide a greater understanding of situations leading to violence. This includes consulting the Region of Peel and working with York Region's Employee Health, and Health and Safety Units to evaluate the current reporting system and find ways to enhance reporting criteria. All reported incidents of violence are investigated to mitigate future events through implementing lessons learned from call reviews.

- **Wellness and resilience building resources to support paramedics:** Paramedic Services is supporting staff through the following methods:
 - Peer Support Team – trained frontline paramedics with lived experience of mental health illness are available to conduct check-ins and follow-ups with their peers
 - Critical Incident Stress Management Team – frontline workers and mental health professionals are available to assist paramedics who encounter critical or traumatic events
 - Regular townhalls for paramedics to bring forward issues and engage directly with leadership
 - Wellness activities delivered in partnership with Wounded Warriors Canada and Corporate Wellness where staff are provided various resources and strategies to prevent, manage and recover from the impacts of workplace violence
 - As a result of [amendments](#) to the *Workplace Safety and Insurance Act, 1997* regarding posttraumatic stress disorder, paramedics have improved access to workplace safety and insurance board benefits and mental health supports. In addition, York Region’s Employee Health Unit has supported paramedics by providing tools and resources to navigate the benefit process.

Paramedic Services is collaborating with sector partners in our approach to addressing violence on the job

There is growing research and advocacy for change in the paramedic community to prevent external violence against paramedics. Most recently, the Paramedic Chiefs of Canada released a [position statement](#) that supports a zero tolerance position on physical and verbal attacks on paramedics and support staff. In addition, they are developing a National Paramedic Workplace Violence Prevention Framework to empower organizations to make workplace violence prevention a priority, develop pathways to improve interdisciplinary awareness and collaboration, and develop education models that are paramedic specific with particular focus on mental wellness strategies, de-escalation, and trauma informed care.

Paramedic Services will use the Paramedic Chiefs of Canada’s research to inform our actions and will continue to collaborate with and monitor research addressing systemic improvements from other sector partners, including Peel Region, the Ontario Association of Paramedic Chiefs, York Region Mental Health and Addictions Crisis Hub - Access, Referrals and Transitions Table and the Association of Municipalities of Ontario. The Chief of York Region Paramedic Services is a participating member of these organizations and will leverage these partnerships in the paramedic community to build upon practical measures to support paramedics.

York Region does not tolerate harassment and violence in the workplace and is committed to supporting and protecting its staff

While maintaining a high-level of customer service is important, York Region has a zero-tolerance stand on violence in the workplace as set out in the Region's *Preventing and Managing Violence in the Workplace* Policy. In addition, the health and well-being of our staff remains a top priority and any form of violence or harassment will not be tolerated. York Region is supporting staff by providing them with new tools to help them more effectively interact with difficult individuals and strategies to disengage from disrespectful interactions in a professional manner.

Council is requested to support a communication to the Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada requesting enhanced protection for paramedics

Building public awareness of issues of violence against paramedics and the impact on their overall well-being, job motivation and ability to focus on patient care is important to promoting change. Council support is needed to increase this awareness and to advocate to the federal government for system level change. Regional advocacy will focus on the following two areas:

- **Greater public awareness of the impacts of violence on paramedics.** This is needed to change public perception that violence is a normal part of a paramedic's job and to send a clear message that violence against paramedics is unacceptable and will not be tolerated. Council advocacy would help to gain public support and inform the public that the Service is taking a zero-tolerance approach towards violence against staff.
- **Legislative changes through amendments to the Criminal Code.** Changes to the criminal code are needed so that violence against paramedics is treated as an indictable criminal offence and carries appropriate sentencing for offenders. The Criminal Code already contains provisions to treat acts of violence against peace officers as an indictable offence. Advocating for changes to the Criminal Code to protect other types of workers encountering violence on the job has been successful as well. For example, transit worker representatives and transit organizations successfully advocated for a [2015](#) amendment to the Criminal Code that now requires courts to consider aggravating circumstances for the purposes of sentencing, such as the fact that the victim of an assault is a public transit operator.

Similar to public transit workers, changes to the Criminal Code should include requirements for courts to consider at sentencing the fact that the victim of violence is a paramedic performing an essential public service. [Bill C-211, An Act to amend the Criminal Code \(assaults against health care professionals and first responders\)](#), underscores the physical and psychological impact of assaults against paramedics and that they should be protected from harm on the job. With the support of Regional Council, staff request the Regional Chair submit a letter to the federal Minister of Justice to request amendments to the Criminal Code through Bill C-211 to provide protections for paramedics. This approach is supported by Peel Region and national paramedic leadership.

5. Financial

There is no financial impact associated with this report. Paramedic Services has an annual training budget of \$280,000 to provide all front-line paramedics with continuing medical education, professional development, peer support and wellness supports.

6. Local Impact

The wellbeing of paramedics is vital to the overall wellbeing of the York Region community. It is important that the residents of York Region understand the impact of acts of violence against paramedics and support a zero-tolerance approach. Paramedic Services will continue to work collaboratively with key partners in paramedic leadership and the local community to support the safety of paramedics.

7. Conclusion

York Region Paramedic Services is committed to creating and maintaining a psychologically healthy workplace for all paramedic staff so that they can continue to provide a high level of service to the community. Paramedics are an invaluable asset, and this has been demonstrated through their integral role in the Region's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Even under the strain of the pandemic, it is important that this topic remains an area of focus for us all.

With the support of Regional Council, Paramedic Services will continue to advocate and raise public awareness on issues of external workplace violence to educate the public and advance efforts to support change and improve working conditions for paramedics.

For more information on this report, please contact Lisa Gonsalves, General Manager at 1-877-464-9675 ext. 72090. Accessible formats or communication supports are available upon request.



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August 13, 2021
eDOCS # 13145350