

May 29, 2008

Government moving ambulance services under Alberta's health system

New model reconciles governance and funding, integrate ground emergency services with health care providers

Edmonton... In a move designed to improve patient care, accountability, and efficiency, government will transfer responsibility for ground ambulance services from municipalities to the new provincial health authority. The transition will take full effect April 1, 2009.

"EMS practitioners are highly trained health care professionals providing front line care and saving lives," said Health and Wellness Minister Ron Liepert. "They rightfully belong in the health care system as first responders to medical emergencies."

The decision is based on extensive study done recently by an MLA committee, departmental review, discovery projects, and review of those projects by an independent third party analyst.

As well, over the past ten years a series of reports, consultations and discussions have taken place around the province on this topic. They have all generally reached the same conclusion - Emergency Medical Service (EMS) is health care, and therefore the governance and funding belong in the health system.

"This is an excellent example of what I've spoken of before - some of these things have been studied to death, and it's time to take decisive action," Liepert said. "Ambulance service is health care and as such should be part of the health system. This just makes sense. We will increase funding and provide leadership to ensure the transition is as seamless as possible."

In preparation for the formal transfer of operational roles and responsibilities, Alberta Health and Wellness has prepared transition materials as a principal guide for the new provincial health authority to move to a fully integrated ground EMS.

Alberta is striving for a comprehensive, seamless, fully integrated health system. Repeatedly, previous research concluded and recommended that EMS should be structured and managed as an integral component of the health care system and that the services should be coordinated to be better able to address the geographic and demographic differences that exist throughout the rural and urban areas of the province.

The new provincial health authority will have the flexibility to either provide services directly, or they may establish agreements with third party providers, but the ultimate responsibility lies within the health care system. Users of ambulance services will continue to pay a portion of the cost. When the transfer of services is complete, the province will cover 90 per cent of total costs, as opposed to 67 per cent covered today.

Once ambulance governance has been transferred to the health system, for consistency purposes EMS practitioners will become an essential service.

This move represents the latest action by government on a series of fundamental reforms outlined in a health action plan released last month. Earlier this month government announced a new governance model for the health system with the creation of the Alberta Health Services Board.

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Backgrounder attached.

Media enquiries north of Red Deer may be directed to:

Shannon Haggarty, Communications, Alberta Health and Wellness, 780-427-7164, or

Media enquiries in Red Deer and south may be directed to:

Howard May, Communications, Alberta Health and Wellness, 403-660-1870

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Facts and statistics on ambulance services

The present ambulance system in Alberta costs \$190 million to which the province contributes \$128 million. This year, Alberta Health and Wellness will provide additional one time funding of approximately \$29 million to support transition activities.

In 2009/2010 enhancements of \$27 million will be introduced to increase levels of service with an additional \$40 million to replace current municipal funding. Total system costs will be \$217 million; which includes \$19 million in patient revenue and \$3 million from the Government of Canada.

In addition, this year, municipalities will continue to receive \$55 million to help offset any costs they incur to ensure services are provided to March 31, 2009. This is the fourth year they have received this grant funding, which was previously unavailable to the municipalities.

More than 80 service providers supply ground ambulance services throughout Alberta. There are an average of about 260,000 trips per year, involving more than 500 ambulances and 3,000 emergency medical services practitioners.

Background studies on responsibility for ambulance services

Over the past ten years a series of reports, consultations and discussions have taken place around the province on the responsibility for ambulance services. They have all generally reached the same conclusion - Emergency Medical Service (EMS) is health care, and therefore the governance and funding belong in the health system.

Previous research and reviews provided by the MLA Review of Ambulance Service Delivery (2003) and the Minister of Health and Wellness' Ambulance Governance Advisory Council (2006) concluded that EMS should be more focussed on patient care, and that services should be coordinated to be better able to address the geographic and demographic differences that exist throughout the rural and urban areas of the province.

Coupled with this research, the EMS Discovery Projects currently being managed by the Palliser and Peace Country Health Regions provide significant operational knowledge and understanding on how the transfer of services (including inter-professional links) could be achieved. These projects began in April 2005.

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