



February 1, 2021

Honourable Jason Kenney
Premier and President of Executive Council
Office of the Premier
Executive Branch
307 Legislature Building
10800 - 97 Avenue
Edmonton, AB T5K 2B6

Honourable Tyler Shandro
Minister of Health
Office of the Minister
Health
423 Legislature Building
10800 - 97 Avenue
Edmonton, AB T5K 2B6

Re: Ambulance Dispatch Consolidation Failures

Dear Premier Kenney, Minister Shandro and Government Caucus:

The Minister of Health and Alberta Health Services (“AHS”) promised that there would be no service disruptions or degradation of emergency service delivery after ambulance dispatch consolidation. Since January 12, 2021, our communities and emergency patients have experienced delays and disruption in dispatch times and first responders have been exposed to additional risk. We request an immediate inquiry into the Emergency Medical Services (“EMS”) dispatch failure, which occurred last Tuesday. We request an urgent resolution to the following public safety issues:

AHS Technical Outage:

We would like to bring to your attention a significant emergency situation that occurred on Tuesday, January 26, 2021, between 10:30 pm and 11:42 pm. The AHS South Communication Centre experienced a technical outage, which resulted in AHS Emergency Medical Services dispatching ambulances manually and AHS dispatchers did not have access to the following services:

- The Computer Aided Dispatch (“CAD”) interface between AHS CAD and the fire CAD
- Mobile data terminals,
- GPS tracking of ambulances, and
- The ability to access ambulance mobile phone numbers.

AHS did not notify our emergency dispatchers at the time of the outage, nor has AHS provided any updates for clarification on the outage. Our emergency dispatchers have

contacted AHS, and our staff have not received an explanation for the outage. We are currently assessing the impact this technical blackout had for our patients.

On October 2, 2020, Darren Sandbeck, the Chief Paramedic with Alberta Health Services, submitted an op-ed and stated the following: *"We look forward to a productive working relationship with each municipality as we work to improve healthcare for all Albertans."*

Our experience on this significant outage demonstrates that AHS is not transparent and does not share information. Our emergency dispatchers should have been contacted as soon as the incident occurred, with an explanation as to why it occurred, and what mitigation measures were put in place. In our communities, our standard protocol is to call the communities we dispatch to explain the problem when a situation happens. Emergency dispatch should focus on patients, and the technical outage shows that AHS is not focused on patient outcomes.

Dispatch Delays Affecting Patient Outcomes:

Our communities have experienced errors and delays in dispatch and response times, which is affecting patient care. Furthermore, we are aware of recent dispatch delays in other communities, which are a consequence of overburdened dispatch centres. Specifically, our communities have experienced information errors and dispatch delays back to our Medical First Responses ("MFR") as addresses have been wrong and crews sent to the wrong location. The Minister of Health and AHS made the following promises:

On December 11, 2020, the Minister of Health wrote the following in a letter to our offices: *"Please be assured that patient care is at the core of every decision that our government makes with respect to the health system. In addition to being fiscally responsible, this decision maintains patient safety, ensures consistency and sustainability for dispatch services across all communities, and will improve system performance due to gains in efficiency, coordination, and integration within the health system."*

October 2, 2020, Chief Darren Sandbeck, stated the following: *"Local 911 callers will notice no change when the dispatch process switches to the AHS EMS communications centres."*

In only a few weeks since ambulance dispatch consolidation happened, we have seen many errors and delays that affected emergency response times, errors which would not have occurred under the integrated satellite model. Below are just a few:

- Since transition, RMWB estimate that our emergency services staff have had to directly intervene in approximately 20 per cent of the medical calls to prevent AHS-caused delays or negative patient and responder outcomes.
- A caller in RMWB called 911 requiring an ambulance and was transferred three times, and repeated the address six different times, resulting in a four minute delay.
- In RMWB, the AHS mapping system pinned a caller (who was driving) instead of the site of the actual emergency event, causing ambulance crews to be dispatched to the wrong location.
- AHS dispatched EMS to a patient who was not breathing and had no pulse. An MFR was requested and a local dispatcher sent the local fire to the call. After 10 minutes, the EMS

crew notified the local fire crew that the emergency incident was located in a different community, which resulted in a 10 minutes delay.

- An AHS dispatcher sent a MFR request to the wrong fire dispatch centre in Calgary, which needed to be forwarded to the correct fire dispatch centre in Red Deer, resulting in a three-minute delay in response to the emergency.
- A 911 call came to a 911 dispatch centre for a cardiac arrest. It was sent to AHS EMS dispatch when the MFR request was sent, the address provided by AHS was wrong, and the 911 local dispatcher corrected the address, which delayed the response by five minutes.
- A Fire Dispatcher monitor the system from Lethbridge caught a delay in ambulance dispatch and were able to send a fire resource instead. This resulted in only a momentary delay in response while the AHS system would have been delayed significantly (30+ minutes to a chest pain call).

Capacity Issues:

We have raised concerns with the Minister of Health and AHS about cutting from seven provincial dispatch centres to three and how disintegrating ambulance and fire responses would cause capacity issues:

- On January 27, 2021, the RMWB experienced a “Code Red” situation where there were no additional ambulances available for approximately 18 minutes. AHS did not advise the Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo dispatch centre of the status, and if they had, RMWB would have been able to utilize their fire crews to provide services if needed.
- AHS promised to hire additional dispatch staff to cover the increased calls due to consolidation. The AHS dispatch centres remain understaffed, apparently with a shortage of 18 dispatchers, which we are hearing is leading to delays in: the call being answered, dispatching EMS and MFR to an emergency, resulting in delays in emergency medical care.

COVID-19 Protection:

AHS has not provided adequate safety alerts to notified crews of potential COVID-19 cases when arriving at a scene.

- On one occasion, an EMS crews asked if there were COVID-19 cases at the location; AHS dispatchers responded “no,” but the crew recognized the location from previous incidents and three residents at the location were COVID-19 positive.
- On another EMS call, the caller indicated a person in the location was COVID-19 positive; AHS dispatchers notified the EMS crew and the fire crew of the COVID-19 positive person after they arrived on the scene.

It is clear; AHS cannot meet the emergency dispatch demands for Alberta. We call for an immediate inquiry into the technological disruption on January 26, 2021 and a pause on dispatch consolidation until these significant public safety issues can be resolved.

- The Government of Alberta has a duty to understand and rectify why AHS did not communicate the technical outage with all the affected communities and to understand AHS’ contingency plans to deal with future technological disruption to the ambulance dispatch system.

- Additionally, we request that a third-party external review of the EMS dispatch system be conducted to provide recommendations to improve Alberta's emergency services.

Included in this letter are technical briefings from each municipality outlining the impact on patient care due to recent consolidation.

If you would like to discuss further, we invite you to contact the Office of Mayor Tara Veer at 403-342-8111.

Sincerely,



Tara Veer
Mayor, City of Red Deer



Don Scott
Mayor, Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo



Chris Spearman
Mayor, City of Lethbridge



Naheed Nenshi
Mayor, City of Calgary

[Enclosures]

CC: Dr. Verna Yiu, President & CEO of Alberta Health Services