

Ground Ambulance Services

Department of Health and Wellness and Emergency Medical Care Inc.

Key Messages

- Ground ambulance service is in critical state primarily due to:
 - Patient offload delays at hospitals
 - Increase in 911 calls requiring an ambulance
 - Paramedic staffing shortages
 - Emergency department closures
- Without new government initiatives introduced in 2022-23 (new vehicles, transport operators), state of system would be worse.
- Gains resulting from new 2022 transfer system outpaced by other pressures.
- Department not holding Nova Scotia Health accountable for its role in offload delays.
- Department not holding Emergency Medical Care Inc. accountable for poor ambulance response times.
- Emergency Medical Care Inc. implementing working condition improvements; however, paramedics are operating in an unsustainable work environment.
- System is extremely complex with many interrelated parts.

Why We Did This Audit

- Ambulances provide an essential service to sick and injured Nova Scotians.
- Ambulance response and offload times have been significantly increasing since 2017.
- The cost to deliver ground ambulance services in 2022-23 was over \$147 million.
- The ground ambulance system is experiencing significant paramedic staffing challenges.

Ground Ambulance System in a Critical State

- In 2022, province-wide average ambulance response time increased 79% (from 14 minutes to 25 minutes).
- In 2022, on average, paramedics spent one quarter of working hours waiting at emergency departments to offload patients at an estimated cost of over \$12 million.
- Significant response time pressures on Halifax and surrounding areas.
- In 2022, Queen Elizabeth II Health Sciences Centre – Halifax Infirmary average offload delay was over three hours.
- In the last five years, calls requiring an ambulance have increased by 17%.
- Emergency department closures contributing to longer response and offload times.
- Emergency Medical Care Inc. was unable to staff 23% of daily scheduled ambulances in 2022.

Department of Health and Wellness Not Effectively Tracking Key Performance Indicators in Contract with Emergency Medical Care Inc.

- Department of Health and Wellness not holding Emergency Medical Care Inc. accountable for poor response times.
- Emergency Medical Care Inc. not meeting its contractual obligations including providing certain ambulance patient care record details to the Department of Health and Wellness.
- The ground ambulance contract does not include financial penalties for not meeting medical performance standards.

Department of Health and Wellness Not Holding Nova Scotia Health Accountable for Significant Offload Delays

- Department issued directives in 2019 and 2021 to Nova Scotia Health to improve offload times in emergency departments.
- Immediately after each directive, offload times improved.
- Accountability for enforcing and acting on directives not clear.

Paramedic Working Conditions Unsustainable, Indicate Crisis

- Many paramedics are leaving the ground ambulance system citing issues with work-life balance due to overtime, pay and high cost of benefits, and long hours spent waiting in emergency departments to offload patients.
- Number of new paramedic graduates not keeping pace with resignations.
- Cost of paramedic sick time, overtime and allowances for missed breaks and shift overruns has increased by almost \$3 million over the last five years and was \$11.8 million in 2022.

Public Reporting Improvement Needed on Ground Ambulance Dashboard Data

- Weekly public reporting of ambulance data good first step to improve transparency of the ground ambulance system.
- Manual recording by paramedics of patient care transfer to hospital staff creating incomplete and inaccurate data.
- Ambulance data lacks context for Nova Scotians and does not address key pressures on the ground ambulance system.

New Contract Cost Effective as Long as Controls over EMCI Management Fee and Audit Clause Utilized

- EMCI retained half of surpluses in previous contract; new contract better protects province as EMCI must return surpluses to the Department.
- Department is not utilizing audit clause to effectively monitor Emergency Medical Care Inc.