

Rural ambulances to stick to home base

Alberta: Healthcare changes to see new districts created

By Roxanne Blackwell
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The provincial government has announced significant changes coming to rural healthcare, with a move away from the Alberta Health Services superboard and a new strategy to help keep rural areas stocked with ambulances.

Health Minister Stephen Mandel announced on March 18 the government will be moving forward with a number of recommendations from the newly released Rural Health Services Review Committee's final report.

"We understand how important health care is in rural communities, the mandate was to return services to enable communities to make decisions," Mandel said. "We will be introducing healthcare districts, these are operating districts... each district will be responsible and accountable for healthcare delivery."

The 10 or more districts will replace the five geographical zones that currently exist, and the boundaries will be determined in the coming weeks by Alberta Health

Services, with president and CEO Vickie Kaminski saying that Calgary will likely be its own district.

In addition to the zones, Mandel announced changes in emergency medical services, particularly on the issue of rural ambulances being called into the city and leaving rural communities without coverage.

"We are also issuing a protocols to limit the amount of time EMS spend at urban hospitals with a protocol that allows no relocation of EMS vehicle to ensure they return straight to their home base," he said.

"We've heard time and time again from rural communities their ambulance is going to the city and then all of the sudden they're out doing service for the urban centre. This will not be allowed. They must return to right back to their community."

Wildrose leader Heather Forsyth said the changes are a step in the right direction, but more needs to be done to fix emergency management.

"The reality is the core of the problem facing health care in our province remains the same today as



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Emergency responders load a car crash victim into an ambulance after a collision on Highway 2 on March 23. New Alberta Health regulations will have ambulances return to their home bases immediately after transporting patients to hospitals in the city.

it was yesterday: a centralized health model with all the power remaining in Edmonton," she said in a statement. "While many of the recommendations in the report on EMS delivery are what we have heard from communities across Alberta, the fact is a centralized EMS service delivery model is what caused many of the problems we're facing today."

Foothills Regional Emergency Services Committee chairperson Suzanne Oel said she too is cautiously optimistic, and will wait and see what kind of an impact the changes have on ambulance service in the area.

"It's a quick fix. The reason why we would say that is the current practice to send the closest ambulance is a good

practice, and this would interfere with that. What they need to do is backfill rather than to stop sending the closest ambulance because that causes service related problems," Oel said. "We would suggest they need a better program to do backfilling to cover the locations that are left vacant with the ambulance that is closest to the vacancy that is not

on call to an emergency situation."

Ultimately, Oel agrees with Forsyth and said the overarching problem is the centralized dispatch system, which took away dispatch from FRESC in 2009 and relocated it to Calgary. Oel pointed out that since then there have been issues with ambulances being able to navigate and find rural addresses, and numerous "code reds" which is when an area is left without ambulance coverage temporarily.

She said the changes may help, but will continue fighting to regain dispatch control.

"Are the changes going to have any effect when for example 26 municipalities (covered by FRESC) have tried to coordinate to find a solution from the grassroots level and they've told us 'we've gone too far with centralization, too bad,'" she said. "We've seen how dispatch used to work. There are some cases in the province where they're happy with consolidation, where as we had a really effective solution here in southern Alberta, we know it could be coordinated better."