

Health minister deflects push for return to local EMS dispatch in Alberta foothills

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Suzanne Oel, Foothills Regional 911 Commission chair holds letters of support from all municipalities in her region to the Minister of Health titled "Municipal Support for the Return of EMS Dispatch to FRESC" in Priddis, Alta., on May 5, 2017. Ryan McLeod/Postmedia Network

Opposition calls to return southern Alberta EMS dispatch to previous stakeholders were rebuffed by Health Minister Sarah Hoffman on Tuesday.

The Foothills Regional Emergency Services Commission (FRESC), which serves 26 municipalities and 33 fire stations stretching from Lake Louise to Fort Macleod, raised the alarm this week over soaring ambulance response times since ambulance dispatch moved to a consolidated call centre operated by Alberta Health Services in Calgary, pleading with the health minister to return to a local service.

On Tuesday, Livingstone-Macleod MLA Pat Stier reiterated those concerns, repeatedly asking why the health minister won't return control of local ambulances to FRESC.

"Instead of just monitoring the situation, why won't the minister and AHS do the right thing and allow Foothills 911 to become a satellite EMS dispatch centre, as has been done in four other major centres in Alberta?" Stier said Tuesday, referring to Red Deer, Lethbridge, Calgary and Fort McMurray, all of which were successful in holding on to their local EMS dispatch.

Hoffman didn't directly address Stier's question, but said the issues were part of ongoing growing pains in regards to the change. She also pointed a finger at the previous Progressive Conservative government for getting the ball rolling on dispatch consolidation.

"I hope that the member will lean over to the left, or the next time he's in the back rooms with members of the PC caucus, ask them why this policy change happened seven years ago."

FRESC commission chair Suzanne Oel criticized Hoffman for deflecting Stier's question, and said the issue goes far deeper than just monitoring response times.

"They can see there's a problem, and she's able to solve it," she said in an interview Tuesday.

"If the policy is wrong, she can change it because she has the authority to do so, and save lives."

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Saving lives is the motivation behind returning dispatch to Foothills 911 say proponents, who have cited several examples of delayed calls and dispatch errors over the past year.

The issue came to light on Monday after the 26-member municipal emergency communications commission made public their concerns about how emergency calls are handled in rural communities.

“This is serious, given that recent poorly coordinated EMS call and delays and errors have lead to deaths,” Stier said to the legislature on Tuesday, referring to an over 50-minute delay earlier this year to dispatch a fire department medical first response for a patient who ultimately died of cardiac arrest.

“Given only 4% of emergency calls are being sent to Foothills 911 within the industry standard response time, Mr. Speaker, you (Hoffman) can make an immediate decision and save lives.”

Oel took exception to government assertions about change management and blame-passing, saying it distracts from the primary issue.

“Either they’re trying to confuse people, or they just don’t get it,” she said.

“We’re talking about problems with 911 call handling and communications — seven years of it.”

Oel said confusion and delays occur due to how 911 calls are handled under the current regime.

She said problems occur when local 911 calls, answered at FRESC’s dispatch centre in Black Diamond, are transferred to EMS dispatch in Calgary — a process that itself introduces a 30 second delay.

From there, it’s up to EMS dispatchers to decide if a fire department medical response is required, and then send that request back south to FRESC via mobile data terminals. This introduces another three-and-a-half minute to the call, a delay Oel says has often taken much longer.

From there, FRESC fire department dispatchers need to build, page and transmit the call from the information provided by EMS, which itself takes at least another minute.

This, Oel says, adds roughly five minutes to the dispatch — nearly three times than it would if local EMS and fire dispatch were co-located in the same spot, assuming everything goes smoothly at all steps.

“When you separate that call, you’re delaying the response,” she said.

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