

# Dispatch delays keep piling up as government “monitors’: Foothills 911



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". Ryan McLeod/Postmedia Network

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Nearly a month after Alberta's health minister vowed to [monitor lengthy EMS dispatch delays in rural southwest Alberta](#), the patience of an affected 911 commission has all but run out.

"Very little has changed," said Jamie Tiessen, vice-chair of the Foothills Regional Emergency Services Commission, frustrated by what he describes as unnecessary and dangerous delays in transferring requests for fire department medical first response calls from Alberta Health Services dispatchers in Calgary.

"We've provided updates to AHS middle-management and copied the (health) minister, so she was aware we were doing that, but other than that, we've heard nothing.

"From an external partner point of view, we would sure love to provide more information, but things haven't changed."

In a story first reported by Postmedia in May, Foothills officials made public their concerns over these delays, a problem they blame on the province's move earlier this year to remove EMS dispatch from Foothills 911 as part of a provincewide consolidation initiative.

Capable of arriving at remote and rural scenes faster than ambulances, first medical response teams consisting of local firefighter crews are often dispatched alongside EMS for urgent medical calls.

The commission is demanding Alberta Health Minister Sarah Hoffman immediately return local EMS dispatch to it, a consideration granted to other communities and one Tiessen says can be immediately accommodated.

Numbers provided to Postmedia by the commission show call transfer delays remain a problem for rural first responders.

Only five per cent of calls requiring supplemental medical dispatch are being received by Foothills 911 within National Fire Protection Association standards, which state processing times for first response calls be "90 seconds, 90 per cent of the time."

That's up from four per cent a month ago.

Earlier this year, the commission reported that 73 per cent of requests were one minute over the 90-second standard. As of May 30, that number's risen to 95 per cent.

"They argue it's protocols, I argue they can't even meet their own protocols," he said. "They should be able to easily tell us, once they've assessed the call, whether or not we're needed, we shouldn't have to wait."

Requests for comment by the health minister were not answered Friday.

As better weather brings tourists into the mountain park areas, Tiessen is concerned about increased demands. In May, four of the five worst delay days occurred around the Victoria Day weekend.

The longest occurred on May 20, when Foothills 911 wasn't notified about a request for nearly 55 minutes.

A delay of 21 minutes and 42 seconds was recorded three days earlier on May 17, while May 22 and May 23 each saw response delays of over nine minutes.

Southwestern Alberta's 911 calls are answered at the commission's Black Diamond dispatch centre.

While medical calls used to be handled in-house, these are now transferred to Calgary EMS dispatch — adding 30 seconds to the call.

If medical first response by local fire crews is warranted, the request is keyed into a second system and sent back south to Foothills 911 via data terminals, adding another three-and-a-half minutes to the call — assuming no human errors or equipment failures along the way.

From there, FRESC fire dispatchers build the call and dispatch local fire crews, about a minute from first glance to broadcasting alert tones both in fire halls and pagers hanging on the belts of volunteer firefighters.

"When you start averaging those numbers out, it's a very difficult thing to argue," Tiessen said.

When the issue was raised during question period last month by Livingstone-Macleod MLA Pat Stier, Hoffman promised to monitor the situation, while deflecting blame for dispatch consolidation to the previous government.

That's all water under the bridge to Tiessen, who maintains the minister has always had the power to solve the issue by returning EMS dispatch to Foothill's control.

"If you take away the longevity and history of this issue, and you just go with the fact AHS has been doing this since Feb. 21 — that's a new way of doing business, and they've been doing a bad job of it," he said.

"It's got nothing to do with history, it's strictly about transfer times."

Meanwhile, both residents and officials in southwestern rural areas of the province continue to have their calls for help met with frustrating delays.

"Councils continue to pass motions, mayors continue to write letters, we're advocating with the fire chiefs — we're doing everything we can," he said. "At the end of the day, we really need to fix this system. We just want to be listened to."

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<http://www.calgarysun.com/2017/06/02/dispatch-delays-keep-piling-up-as-government-continues-to-monitor-foothills-911>