

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Paramedics cite safety concerns during flu ‘high alert’

VANCOUVER – B.C. Ambulance Paramedics have major safety concerns about the potential for spreading swine flu. The 3,500 ambulance attendants say the problem is their respirators.

The B.C. Ambulance Service is obligated to maintain adequate supplies and “fit test” paramedics annually to make sure their masks are effective. But the paramedics say many of them “haven’t been tested in years.” They say some locations and ambulances don’t have masks and that if they do, they often don’t seal properly - making them less effective at stopping possible infection and transmission of flu.

“This current health crisis highlights the severity of letting the ambulance service deteriorate to the degree that it has,” said Ambulance Paramedics of BC president John Strohmaier. “Our members are the front line of health care and could well be transporting infected people - the public could be at risk of the flu spreading faster and further.

“We are monitoring the situation closely, and whatever actions we are forced to take will be to safeguard the health of our members and the people of British Columbia,” Strohmaier said.

The paramedics, members of CUPE 873, have been calling on the BC government for four years to deal with the “critical condition” of the ambulance service. They have been on strike since April 1 for improved staffing levels and better response times, wage parity with other emergency responders in B.C. and a multi-year contract for stability.

CUPE 873 regional health and safety officer Cam Stockdale explains that “ambulance paramedics are not only concerned for their own safety, but for their families and for the public. Each paramedic accepts that the job comes with inherent risks due to the nature of the work. However, what really concerns them now is that the employer has neglected to address significant safety concerns.”

“Federal Health Minister Leona Aglukkaq has said Ottawa will take whatever measures are necessary to keep the public safe,” Strohmaier said, “we would like to have the same assurances from B.C. Minister of Health Services George Abbott and B.C. Ambulance Services boss Lee Doney – in the form of action to make sure British Columbians have the best care possible NOW!”

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