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Fireworks shine light on understaffing problem

VANCOUVER—CUPE 873, Ambulance Paramedics of BC, are raising concerns about public safety for tonight's opening event for the annual Celebration of Lights fireworks festival.

"We're concerned that people are at risk," says CUPE 873 president John Strohmaier. "We are expecting up to 100 additional calls to come in and with understaffing the way it is, I just don't see how these calls can be properly handled."

Strohmaier is referring to the 200 Full Time Equivalent positions that the BC Ambulance Service continues to try to fill using overtime hours, instead of hiring additional ambulance paramedics.

At tonight's event, there will be no specialized paramedic teams in attendance. The usual complement of six bicycle squads, which are used to get through large crowds at such events, will be reduced to two.

The paramedics want to make sure the public understands that the situation is not the result of their current labour dispute.

"I used to work at this event, and I'm convinced that someone is going to need help and it won't be available," says BJ Chute, director of Public Education for CUPE 873.

Chute explains that there are only two ambulances in the West End and one in Kitsilano at night. "Last year, we ended up not having coverage and I can tell you, a lot was happening on the streets. With such a large crowd, I'm very worried."

Ambulance paramedics have been on strike since April 1. They want the government to negotiate so that improvements can be made to how services are delivered. Chronic understaffing and long response times continue to be the biggest issues paramedics want the government to address.

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Contact:

BJ Chute, Director of Public Education, Ambulance Paramedics of BC: 604.218.6169
Dan Gawthrop, CUPE National Communications Representative: 604.999.6132

