

BACKGROUND

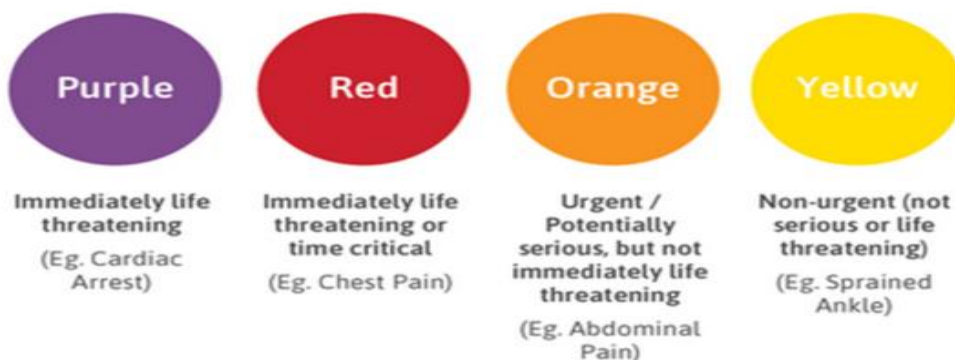
The BC Government is strongly committed to an effective and high performing ambulance services. This government has made significant investments in BCEHS. From 2016/17 to 2020/21 the budget for BCEHS has increased by 31.8%:

- Since 2017, the BC Emergency Health Services annual budget has grown from \$424.25 million to \$559.12 million a year. An average annual increase of 7.97% compared to an average annual increase of 3.65% in the previous four-year period.
- Between 2017 and 2019, BC added 115 paramedic positions to support direct patient care, improve service and response times, and modernize dispatch operations.
- The first ever collective agreement with CUPE 873, the union representing B.C.'s emergency health service workers was successfully negotiated for a three-year term April 1, 2019 – March 31, 2022.
- In 2020, BC invested in 55 new ambulances and contracted for 5 new air ambulances to support rural, remote, First Nation pre-hospital care with an additional 660 hours of additional paramedic coverage and an increase of 16 Advanced Care Paramedics being added across the province.

As the provincial restrictions relaxed as part of the COVID-19 restart plan, BCEHS has experienced significant increases in demand. This demand escalated with a recent heatwave. This is on a base level of sustained demand from the ongoing overdose emergency.

BCEHS data linked to response times to meet benchmarks to the 90th percentile clearly show the year over year growth in volume of calls and reduced response times at the 90th percentile.

Context – Call Types



Assessment

There has been increasing demand across the Medical Priority Dispatch events over the last three years. Continuing growth in the highest to high acuity calls is evidenced in the purple, red and orange events. The yellow events or moderate acuity represent a large volume of calls and have remained constant over the three years.

BCEHS has been reporting median response times, which have generally been maintained. However, areas, when looked at using the 90th percentile (this will be the new requirement for reporting going forward), there are longer response times than the 9-minute median target for the most critical events.

Events with the largest increases (Q1-Q2 2021 vs Q1-Q2 2019):

- Unknown Problem (39% increase; 3,753 increase in events)
- Overdose / Poisoning (Ingestion) (28% increase; 3,530 increase in events)
- Chest Pain (Non-Traumatic) (11% increase; 2,136 increase in events)
- Abdominal Pain (14% increase, 1,174 increase in events)
- Heart Problems / AICD (24% increase; 1,068 increase in events)

As shown above, 911 event volumes are increasing over pre-pandemic levels. Events with the largest increases (Q1-Q2 2021 vs Q1-Q2 2019):

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Time Waiting for Patient Transfer at Emergency Departments

The amount of time ambulances are unable to leave emergency departments and respond to 911 calls is also increasing and contributing to extended response times.

Action

Based on the continued sustained pressure on the BC Ambulance through increased volumes of calls and events the Minister of Health is directing that the BCEHS to focus on two specific goals:

1. Provide timely and exceptional service to British Columbian's when and where they need ambulance services
2. Be an outstanding employer in supporting the wellness of call, dispatch, and paramedic staff

To support BCEHS to achieve these goals the Minister of Health is taking several actions:

- The appointment of a new chair and reconstituted board of BCEHS that is focused solely on ambulance services and its staff accountable directly to the Minister of Health focused on getting meaningful results linked to the two goals.
- The appointment of a new senior executive VP as the Chief Ambulance Officer reporting to the BCEHS board and a member of the senior executive team of PHSA. The Chief Ambulance Officer will be solely focused on providing senior executive leadership for the BC Ambulance Service and the achievement of the two goals working collaboratively with the BC Ambulance senior management team, ambulance paramedics, and the ambulance union leadership.
- A series of immediate actions to strengthen ambulance operations focused on increasing the capacity of dispatch and paramedics to respond quickly to urgent patient calls:
 - The Ministry of Health will make available budget resources and direct BCEHS to hire an additional 30 full-time dispatchers
 - The Ministry of Health will make available budget resources and direct BCEHS to hire 85 full-time paramedics for Metro/Large Urban regions beyond hiring already planned for 2020/21 focused on reducing wait times for purple and red events.
 - The Ministry of Health will direct BCEHS to bring forward an assessment, recommendations, and an action plan to the Minister by the end of September on the conversion of up to 22 pre-hospital SOC stations ¹to 24/7 ALPHA stations to enhance ambulance coverage for these communities. The plan will set out timelines and prioritization for the conversion starting with six communities October 1 and with completion of all recommended conversions by June 30, 2022.
 - The Ministry of Health will direct health authorities to provide additional and appropriate staff available to receive and care for patients before they can be formally admitted to the Emergency Department, to reduce hand-over times for paramedics and get paramedics and ambulances back on the road to respond to patient calls.
 - The Ministry of Health will provide funding and direct BCEHS to purchase an additional 22 ambulances for the Metro Vancouver/Fraser regions.
- The Ministry of Health will work with BCEHS and the union leadership to take immediate action to better support employee wellness. The Ministry of Health will provide funding to contract a team of mental health and wellness professionals to work directly with dispatch staff and paramedics to address chronic stress, fatigue and to support wellness among staff (including access to trauma informed therapy).

¹ Burns Lake, Vanderhoof, Fernie, Kimberley, Golden, Revelstoke, Fort St James, Ashcroft, Princeton, Keremeos, Bowser, Pemberton, Sicamous, Lillooet, Peachland, Chetwynd, Houston, Cumberland, Barriere, Fort Nelson, Clearwater, Port McNeilPort

The Minister also recognizes and strongly supports the collaborative work of BCEHS and the Ambulance Paramedics of BC union leadership over the past several days. They have identified a range of areas to work collaboratively focused on employee wellness; operations, workload, and response times; recruitment and retention; building public confidence and understanding of ambulance services (see attached).

The Minister is directing the Emergency Medical Assistants Management Licensing Board (EMALB) to provide recommendations by September 6 to the Minister for scope of practice changes that will allow firefighters to use an expanded diagnostic skill set to allow for more effective patient assessments for timely information updates for incoming paramedics and the use of expanded skill sets for immediate mitigation of life-threatening medical scenarios in advance of the arrival of paramedics. This will provide the basis for consultation with municipalities and BCEHS on the implementation of Collaboration Agreements in response of the respective service to calls. In addition, there will be a return to the pre-COVID-19 pandemic first responder dispatching practices for 9-1-1 which will also alleviate operational pressures caused by the sharp increase in 911 call volumes.

Finally, the Minister of Health has asked the new Board Chair, working with the BCEHS Board and Chief Ambulance Officer, management and staff, to create a refreshed vision and go-forward strategy for the BC Ambulance Service and bring this back to the Health Minister for consideration of additional actions for 2022/23 forward.