

Saskatchewan gov't launching review of emergency medical services

By Angela Hall, Leader-Post December 11, 2008



Health Minister Don McMorris speaks to media.

Photograph by : Roy Antal, Leader-Post

REGINA -- A review of emergency medical services in Saskatchewan will diagnose any ills in Saskatchewan's road ambulance services, Health Minister Don McMorris says.

Recommendations from the EMS review, once complete in spring 2009, will help form a long-term plan for improving services and ensuring they're as effective, accessible and fair as possible, McMorris said.

"It's a huge province, and we've heard some concerns sometimes in rural Saskatchewan that if there is an accident or a heart attack, will the services be there in time," said the minister after a news conference Thursday inside Regina EMS headquarters.

McMorris also announced that a separate review at a later date will examine whether a helicopter should be added to Saskatchewan's air medical fleet, which currently includes three King Air aircraft.

"It will only be done if it makes sense. It will only be done if it can be integrated into the system that we already have," said McMorris.

Meanwhile, the Sask. Party government also pledged a one-time fuel subsidy of \$1.7 million for road ambulance operators. Even though fuel prices have recently decreased, the record high of earlier this year has been a big financial burden, McMorris said.

Ron Dufresne, president of the Saskatchewan Emergency Medical Services Association, said the subsidy will bring some relief in the short-term, while the need for a long-term overarching vision for EMS is also critical.

"Now we'll be able to corral everyone to have 12 health regions and 109 ambulance services working towards the same end. As a result, the patient is going to be the focus of that review," said Dufresne.

McMorris said he also hears concerns about the cost to an individual of an ambulance trip, but couldn't say whether that will change as a result of the review.

A portion of the cost is offset through Saskatchewan Health, and there is also a program to help senior citizens with the fees. But the tab to some patients for an ambulance trip can still be steep, particularly when a hospital is several kilometres away.

The basic call pick-up fee in urban centres is \$300, according to a ministry official.

"We look forward to the review doing its work and putting forward recommendations, whether it may be some issues around cost, whether it's issues around accessibility. I'm certainly not going to pre-judge what the review is going to say," McMorris said.

The review may also look at the delivery model of emergency medical services. Road ambulance services are provided through the health regions, but about 40 operations are privately owned. Another 56 of the ambulance services are publicly owned, while 13 are non-profit, the minister said.

Edmonton-based consultant Don Cummings, who is leading the EMS review committee, said a number of other jurisdictions are doing, or have completed, similar studies.

"There's a real opportunity in Saskatchewan to take a look at what the next long term period for EMS looks like," Cummings said.

"Accessibility is always a big issue. How fast can the ambulance get to the service that is needed, especially when you've got a geographic spread like Saskatchewan has? Funding and financial strategy is always another important aspect, and integration with other professionals. How do we best integrate the EMS professional with other health professionals so we can give a continuum of care to citizens and patients?"

ahall@leaderpost.canwest

© Copyright (c) The Regina Leader-Post



Health Minister Don McMorris speaks to media.

Photograph by : Roy Antal, Leader-Post