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Northeast example looked at as cure for non-emergent ambulance transfers

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In an effort to keep emergency vehicles on the clock, the Kenora District Services Board is looking east.

The Manitoulin-Sudbury District Social Services Area Board, representing a region similar to Kenora forced to divert ambulances for non-emergent transfers, presented the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-term Care a business plan that would have the province pick up the tab to suit up decommissioned ambulances for non-medical transfers.

It's an idea Dan McNeill, chief administrative officer of the Kenora District Services Board, is keeping an eye on.

"We presented it to our board just for interest purposes at this point hoping that they will be successful because if they are successful, we will pursue a similar service here," he said. "Again, primarily for Kenora but we also have transfers from our other communities as well that we are using emergency vehicles for."

The Manitoulin-Sudbury proposal estimates a first year cost of just over \$129,000 for one non-urgent unit, which would fall to \$115,341 annually after one-time start-up costs. Two units would run \$244,574 in the first year and level out at \$218,954.

McNeill noted hospitals in Southern Ontario centres like London, Toronto and Ottawa have access to private transportation contractors and can pull funding out of their operating budgets. Facilities in the North have no such access.

"It's an issue and it has been for a long, long, long time," he said. "The province has studied it a number of times — two or three times — and there were recommendations brought forward and those recommendations were, essentially, that a secondary service needed to be put in place — like a non-emergent service — or funded, one or another."

"It's a long-term issue," he added. "It's not an issue unique to us, it's an Ontario issue and the province has neglected to really address it in any meaningful way and you can see why. This will be an expensive undertaking if it is approved but they've taken the position that emergency vehicles can and will be used until something else is put in place."

In the meantime, while the Kenora board observes the progress of the Manitoulin-Sudbury proposal, McNeill said emergency crews here are left to roll the dice that no emergencies are called in while on a non-medical tour.

"You can guess that there is a lot of emergency service being directed to non-emergency services, so the question is has any of those events ever delayed an emergency response to such point that it's created difficulties," he said, noting a recent report out of Thunder Bay said ambulance crews there were unable to provide initial response to nearly 1,000 calls last year as crews were on non-emergent work.

"In our case the answer is no," he said. "It's created operating difficulties, no question about that, but as far as not good outcomes for citizens, we can honestly say that's never happened."

gwilliams@bowes.com

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