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## NEWS LOCAL

# Non-emergency transfer issue in Ministry of Health's hands; unspecified consequences for district services board



By Jon Thompson, Kenora Daily Miner & News  
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Kenora District Services Board contends it's the province, not the municipalities, that is responsible for the cost of transporting hospital patients with non-life threatening illnesses or injuries.

The bills for non-emergent ambulance transfer have arrived at the district's hospitals who all refuse to pay them and the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care has yet to take action.

The ministry has condemned the Kenora District Services Board (KDSB) for its plan to charge hospitals for the transfers and have warned the board there will be unspecified consequences for what it sees as a violation of the province's Ambulance Act. The KDSB has hired a consultant and all seven hospitals west of Thunder Bay have agreed to participating in a working group to determine a long-term plan to address non-emergent ambulance costs. The ministry has refused to participate in those meetings and has declined comment for five months since the KDSB announced the action, saying it was waiting for the bills to arrive.

Lake of the Woods District Hospital president Mark Balcaen has passed Kenora's bill on to the ministry and a spokesperson for the ministry said Tuesday it is now launching an investigation to verify whether KDSB is billing hospitals.

While the North West Local Health Integration Network (LHIN) said it's aware of the ministry's position on this issue, a spokesperson said it's awaiting the outcome of the working group before taking a position.

"It is our understanding that there are discussions going on between the DSBs and the hospitals to the west of Thunder Bay about non-emergent ambulance transfers, however, we have not received any information on the outcome of these discussions at this time and as a result are unable to comment further," an email from the LHIN reads.

Balcaen wouldn't reveal the bill's value but expressed it was "significant," valued at thousands of dollars.

"For us, we're the largest one effected," he said. "Most of the other hospitals will end up transferring their patients by air because they're further away from Winnipeg and Thunder Bay that most of their transfers happen by air. In our hospital, most of our transfers happen by land because we're less than 250 kilometres from Winnipeg."

Red Lake Hospital CEO Paul Chatelain called the bills "a little disappointing," adding his hospital is doing its part by transferring as many patients to the airport by taxi as possible.

"We're not paying until we come up with a plausible solution," he said. "We're all working together and I'm surprised the KDSB went ahead and did this. We're working at the table to come up with a solution and we're getting a bill."

Hospital executives in Dryden and Sioux Lookout also confirmed they have no intention of paying the KDSB for the service the services board has traditionally provided. Hospitals in Atikokan and Fort Frances, which are under the Rainy River District Services Board, will be at the table but refused comment.

KDSB CEO Dan McNeill said "part of the reason" for sending the bills out is to force the ministry's hand to act on an issue that is unique to rural Ontario regions served by services boards.

"We were expecting some correspondence or message or something from the ministry and we have yet to receive anything," he said. "We're not sure what that means. We had been told verbally that there would be some response when we sent the invoices out and there hasn't been one, as of yet."

The first meeting of this new working group will occur on Thursday.

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