
Subject: Workplace Violence Strategy – Mitigating the Impact of Increased Violence to NEMS First Responders

Report to: Public Health & Social Services Committee

Report date: Tuesday, October 10, 2023

Recommendations

1. That this report regarding the increased incidents of workplace violence toward front line staff and the strategies that will be used to combat these increases **BE RECEIVED**; and
2. That the Regional Chair, on behalf of Regional Council, **BE DIRECTED** to send follow-up correspondence to the Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada and communicate Council's request that the Criminal Code of Canada be amended to provide protection for first responders and to make violence against first responders an indictable criminal offence.

Key Facts

- Exposure to incidents of violence to first responders at Niagara Emergency Medical Services (Niagara EMS) are increasing.
- Underreporting of incidents of violence is common due to the belief that violence is part of the job and that reporting isn't impactful. Niagara EMS is taking a multi-pronged approach to address violence toward front line staff which will include policy and procedure changes, enhanced training and responses to incidences of violence in addition to a media campaign.
- Regional Council support is needed to build public awareness of the violence faced by first responders during the course of their duties, in order to advance efforts to address system level changes and advocate for legislative changes to strengthen protections for first responders.

Financial Considerations

There is no financial impact associated with this report. Niagara EMS will use annual budgeted dollars to implement the proposed system level improvements as laid out within this report.

Analysis

Exposures to incidents of violence (verbal, physical and sexual) by first responders at Niagara EMS are increasing and often underreported, presenting a significant but common challenge to the profession. In Niagara, reported incidents of violence toward front line staff has increased by 53% since 2018. As of July 31, 2023, there have been more reported incidents of violence (52) in this calendar year than all of 2018 (39) and 2020 (47). A 2019 study completed by Peel Region Paramedic Services found that lack of reporting is linked to the belief that recourse is not available to responders, limited consequences for the perpetrator, and that front line staff may accept violence as an unavoidable work hazard or make light of the situation due to the common occurrence. These findings align a Niagara EMS 2022 workplace violence survey of first responders with regard to underreporting. Of the 134 staff responses, 83 staff witnessed violence to front line staff in the previous 12 months; some reported underreporting violence occurred more than once by staff. However, Niagara EMS health and safety data from 2021 shows that only 60 staff members reported incidents of violence. Within the Niagara EMS workplace violence survey, when asked the reason they did not report incidents of violence, 27 staff members felt as though violence was an inherent job risk and 26 staff members felt that it would not be impactful to report.

Further information gleaned from the Niagara EMS workplace violence survey revealed that of 134 Niagara EMS front line staff, 72% experienced verbal abuse, 52% experienced physical violence, 15% experienced sexual harassment or assault and 12% experienced harassment or assault based on race, culture, or religious/spiritual beliefs while in the workplace.

Incidents of violence takes a toll on first responders themselves and to the organization. Reported impacts by first responders include long term psychological effects such as changes in mood, fear for personal safety, post-traumatic stress injury and decreases in job satisfaction. Resulting service impacts may include staffing challenges due to protracted absenteeism, illness, or injury and increased costs due to additional workplace safety and insurance board claims. A 2020 study conducted by the Paramedic Chiefs of Canada found that 88% of surveyed frontline paramedics across Canada had experienced workplace violence in the last 12 months.

Niagara EMS is taking steps to create awareness and implement system level changes in the following ways:

- **Collaborating with Niagara Regional Police** to improve communication pathways and improve operational protocols.
- **Enhanced Training** in Crisis Intervention for Fall 2023 aimed to improve safety on scene.
- **Encouraging and improving reporting** procedures to ensure early notification and enhanced surveillance of violence towards responders
- **Media campaign to build public awareness** through a series of videos on Public Health and Niagara Regional Police social media platforms, as well as graphics displayed in ambulances and workplaces stating that “Violence is Never OK” and “Compassion First, Violence Never”
- **Enhanced policies and procedures** to increase clarity for scene security and flag addresses where violence has occurred.
- **Building wellness and resilience resources to support front line staff** such as
 - Peer Support, Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) for counselling services, Enhanced Psychological Wellness resource lists, modified work program, Decompression Time and Mental Stress Leave Days,
 - Amendments to the Workplace Safety and Insurance Act, 1997, regarding post traumatic stress disorders, designed to improve access to workplace safety and insurance board benefits and mental health supports.
- **Sending letters to those who intimidate, threaten or harass front line staff.** The letter is intended to inform individuals of the identified unacceptable behaviours that have negatively impacted staff and the actions that must be undertaken to prevent future negative behaviours.

Request to Support a Communication to the Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada

Council support is needed to increase awareness and to advocate to the federal government for system level change. Regional advocacy will focus on the following two areas:

Greater public awareness of the impacts of violence on paramedics. There is needed to change public perception that violence is a normal part of a paramedic’s job and to send a clear message that violence towards paramedics is unacceptable and will not be tolerated.

The Criminal Code of Canada Section 423.2 includes a subsection that makes it an indictable offence to intimidate or impede health professionals during their duties or to obstruct access to health services, but more is needed. Bill C-321, an Act to amend the Criminal Code (assaults against health care professionals and first responders) recognizes the physical and psychological impact of assaults against paramedics, and that they should be protected from harm on the job. With the support of Regional Council, staff request the Regional Chair submit a letter to the federal Minister of Justice to request amendments to the Criminal Code through Bill C-321 and provide these protections for first responders.

Bill C-345, an Act to protect firefighters, paramedics and other first responders, proposes an amendment to the Criminal Code of Canada that increases the penalties and maximum terms of imprisonment for the aggravated assault of first responders to the same level as peace officers. This includes the murder of a first responder to be automatic first-degree murder charge. With the support of Regional Council, staff request the Regional Chair submit a letter to the federal Minister of Justice to request amendments to the Criminal Code through Bill C-345 and provide protections for first responders.

Alternatives Reviewed

System level improvements and strategies to address workplace violence align with the Paramedic Chiefs of Canada Position Statement recommendations regarding interventions; increased research, evidence informed strategies, increased public awareness and changes to policies and legislations.

Relationship to Council Strategic Priorities

These recommendations align with fiscal responsibility as staff who have been victims of workplace violence can result in reduced staffing due to protracted absenteeism, illness, or injury; increased costs due to additional workplace safety and insurance board claims. They also align with the strategic priorities of diversity, equity, inclusion, and Indigenous reconciliation as any violence toward any members of staff, including violence due to race, gender or creed will not be tolerated and action must be taken. Additionally, these recommendations align to partnerships with government and community in that Council can an effective and unified voice to advocate with senior governments on behalf of Niagara.

Prepared by:

Karen Lutz
Deputy Chief, Operations
Niagara Emergency Medical Services

Recommended by:

Azim Kasmani, MD, MSc, FRCPC
Medical Officer of Health and
Commissioner
Public Health & Emergency Services

Submitted by:

Ron Tripp, P.Eng.
Chief Administrative Officer