

Public EMS Dispatch Consolidation

Frequently Asked Questions

October 5, 2020

Why is this transition necessary?

- Patient safety is at the core of every decision we make at Alberta Health Services Emergency Medical Services. This includes our approach to dispatching of EMS services across the province.
- AHS is consolidating dispatch for EMS, ensuring a safer and more reliable borderless EMS dispatch system that will benefit patients.
- When you call 911 for an ambulance, you will get the care you need, without delay. You'll notice no change if you ever need to call 911.
- Ambulance Response Times will not change. Ambulances will not be delayed. Medical first response through fire departments will continue exactly as it does today.
- With this change, AHS will see every available resource in real time and always send the closest paramedics who are best equipped to help you.
- If you need emergency care, you will get it. AHS EMS will also be able to more efficiently coordinate air ambulances, our medical first responder partners, inter-facility transfers and Community Paramedics.
- Incoming emergency EMS calls are answered within 10 seconds, 95 per cent of the time by AHS and no calls to 911 have ever been left waiting
- A province-wide EMS dispatch system is more efficient and allows better coordination of all resources, allowing EMS to send the nearest available ambulance to a patient regardless of any geographic boundaries.
- When people call 911 today, calls are already electronically transferred to a dispatcher across the room to the appropriate agency.
- When the transition is complete, calls will be transferred at the same touch of a button. This already occurs hundreds of times a day in other municipalities like the City of Edmonton.
- Transferring calls electronically between dispatch centres is a trusted process that has been used in Alberta for several years and is seamless to callers. AHS EMS uses the same mapping systems as municipalities, and local paramedics know local geography.
- The current satellite dispatch model where municipalities handle EMS calls does not allow for assigning inter-facility transfers and managing events requiring resources from more than one dispatch area. This increases unnecessary coordination effort in the current model.
- Currently the satellite centres do not coordinate and schedule inter-facility transfers (transfers between health facilities) or Mobile Integrated Health (Community Paramedic) resources; these services are health system based and pose challenges for satellite centres.

Why is this happening now?

- The Ernst and Young recommendation completed earlier this year has validated earlier reports, including one by the Health Quality Council of Alberta, supporting dispatch consolidation for improved patient care and health integration.
- This is a fiscally responsible transition that will maintain patient safety and ensure consistency and sustainability of dispatch services across all communities.

Will this transition cause delays or impact patient safety?

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Will ambulance dispatch and response be delayed as the 911 operator sends the call to AHS?

- Time to call answer is measured by TELUS and reported monthly
- Calls to EMS are answered well over 95% of the time in less than 10 seconds
- EMS has never had 911 calls waiting in a queue
- 911 callers will notice no change

Will transferring callers lead to a risk of losing a call?

- When you call 911 for an ambulance, you will get the care you need, without delay. You'll notice no change if you ever need to call 911.
- Since 2018 all requests for EMS through 911 have been transferred from the municipal 911 system to AHS

Will AHS Communications Centers be able to handle the additional call volume from Calgary and other municipalities?

- AHS EMS will be required to hire approximately 25 positions to take on the new call volume that would be generated by the City of Calgary calls. These positions will be funded with savings from this consolidation.
- Increase in call volume from other municipalities is negligible and will not result in the need for new hires.

What will happen to the staff currently doing the work in the four municipal centers?

- In the four municipalities EMS call taking and dispatch was performed along with 911 call answer, fire department call taking and dispatch, and law enforcement call taking and dispatch along with other municipal roles
- It is anticipated staff will continue to be required to fill these other roles
- Any municipal staff who want to work out of the AHS Southern Communications Centre in Calgary will be encouraged to apply to work at AHS

Will this transition will have a negative impact on the dispatching of Fire/Rescue or Medical First Response (MFR)?

- Nothing will change with respect to the process for dispatching MFR or Fire/Rescue.
- The instant Computer Assisted Dispatch (CAD) to CAD interface with the four municipalities currently used to request Fire/Rescue or MFR response will remain in place.
- The CAD to CAD interface model was implemented in 2011 and has performed with minimal interruption
- The interfaces successfully manage tens of thousands requests annually for medical first response

Does this transition increase risk to EMS and Fire responders?

- The relationship and the exchange of information with law enforcement agencies will not change
- The model is the same throughout the province including local law enforcement agencies and the RCMP

Isn't it better to have dispatchers for fire, police and EMS all in the same room so they can 'twist and shout' to talk to each other in person?

- When other agencies need to be alerted about an emergency call, all information is automatically transferred to the appropriate agency via the AHS Computer Assisted Dispatch (CAD) System.
- Using the CAD system to transfer important information including addresses is fast, reliable and eliminates errors which could be communicated by passing on information verbally.
- Verbally passing on vital information in an emergency 911 call is not a best practice; sharing information when multiple calls are coming in all at once can create confusion and lead to errors or delays in the process.

Aren't dispatchers in a local city dispatch centre more knowledgeable about local addresses and geography?

- It is important to note local 911 callers will notice absolutely no change when the dispatch process switches to the AHS EMS Communications Centres.
- Modern dispatch computer and mapping technology assists both municipal and AHS dispatchers in locating emergencies.

- AHS uses mapping information and data provided by the municipalities; both AHS and municipal dispatchers have precisely the same information at their fingertips.
- Ambulance services in each community will continue to be delivered by the same local paramedics who provide the service today. These local professionals know the streets, locations and neighbourhoods and will continue working with EMS dispatch to respond to any emergency in every local community.

Has AHS done any consultation with the communities affected by this transition?

- The consolidation of EMS dispatch has been discussed with our partners since AHS started to reduce the number of EMS dispatch centres in Alberta several years ago.
- The current state of dispatch has been examined a number of times (such as the HQCA review in 2013) and most recently during the AHS Review.
- AHS will continue to reach out to the municipalities that are affected, to ensure they have the information they need and understand the rationale for this decision.
- AHS looks forward to continued collaboration with our municipal partners and the Government as we phase in this transition.

How much will this transition save?

- \$6.2M annually