

NB Paramedics protest language policy on Dec 14, 2015

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# New Brunswick paramedics to policy changes today

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Paramedics from across New Brunswick are protesting in front of Ambulance NB offices on Monday to protest the details of a new language policy that distributes vacant shifts and hires new employees.

Photo: Daily Gleaner archives

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Paramedics from across New Brunswick will host a series of rallies today to protest the way Ambulance NB is distributing shifts because they say the provincial service is prioritizing language skills over medical skills and experience.

However, officials with Ambulance NB say that's not the case, explaining the ambulance service is simply trying to ensure it can offer emergency medical care in both official languages, which it is required to do by law.

On Monday, paramedics will picket Ambulance NB offices in Saint John, Moncton, and Fredericton between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m. over their concerns about a new official languages policy implemented on Dec. 2 by the provincial service.

Ralph McBride, co-ordinator for Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 4848, said the policy has affected the way shifts and vacation shifts are filled, a move that when combined with new hiring requirements rolled out several months ago, has left paramedics across the province frustrated and contemplating a move to another province.

"We're seeing them implementing a new process for backfilling shifts, like vacations, sick time, that type of thing, stressing the qualification of language," he said.

"They'll go through the first pass of calling people in by language. If there's nobody in the part-timers or casuals that can go into overtime for the permanent staff (who are bilingual). So we're going to go from regular hours to time-and-a-half."

Given the province's ongoing Strategic Program Review process, and cuts to the number of civil servants, teachers and health-care professionals made by successive governments in recent years, he said he's shocked to see this policy implemented.

"That's just ludicrous to be doing that. They know up-front they don't have the right number of qualified, bilingual people in the Health department, so does the language commissioner," he said.

"My issue with that is that para-medicine is a profession. It's not something where everybody coming out of high school can do this is the world I want to go work in.' The fact is that not necessarily everyone who takes up this profession is bilingual. Some are unilingual, either francophone or anglophone.

"It doesn't make sense. It's an additional cost to the taxpayers."

How much money are we talking about? It could be considerable, he said, if the current practice is maintained.



"If we take 100 replacement calls per month, that's going to be major dollars. If we run that scenario for a year, we're increasing the overall costs of providing that service by at least \$175,000-\$200,000. And I'm being generous with that."

"That's problematic for us in that we're talking about finding money for the government, which is trying to address a here Ambulance NB is willing to increase the cost of providing the service due to a language qualification."

McBride also has issues with new hiring protocols, which he says have been in place for at least four or five months.

So far, he said, Ambulance NB has recruited a handful of paramedics from other jurisdictions – some of whom have qualifications than many part-time or casual New Brunswick-based paramedics.

"They can do all the recruitment drives they want, but I find it very disheartening for the people in New Brunswick who can't get hired, but are qualified, except in the language category," he said.

"They'll bring somebody in from outside the province that's qualified in language, but isn't qualified 100 per cent in patient care."

McBride said those paramedics are out in the field with minor restrictions, which bar them from administering certain medications or starting a patient's IV drip.

"These guys, basically, are not qualified at the same level as the New Brunswick paramedics that are waiting for permits but can't get them due to language qualifications," he said.

"I'd like to see a survey of New Brunswickers: Is it more about patient care or is it more about language qualifications?"

He said those paramedics are given time to train and raise their qualifications.

"If that's the case, then why are we not allowing our own taxpayers, our own paramedics, to get up to speed on language training? Being paid to do it? Because these guys are paid to go on the trucks and work and take their training as well. Why is money put into education into language training, at least more than what's currently there?"

Yvon Bourque, director of operations for Ambulance NB, said the provincial ambulance service is designed to offer pre-hospital care and he feels it delivers on that promise every day.

"There are two primary care paramedics from Québec, who work as casual, licensed employees for ANB with PANB certification," he said, explaining that every ambulance crew consists of two licensed practitioners and that paramedics with restrictions have partners who have none.

When asked how much this new policy could cost the service, he didn't address the question in his response.

Currently, Ambulance NB offers distance-education language training programs to its employees through the University of New Brunswick and Rosetta Stone.

The company has agreed to cover half of the costs of the program, which the paramedic must complete on his or her own time.

At the very least, said McBride, maybe Ambulance NB could revisit the language skill-level requested of paramedics.

"If we're talking about conversing, is a (Level) 2 adequate for the needs? Some departments may require more, such as medical terminology, which requires (a Level) 3. That's understandable because that's the field they work in," he said.

"But are there places, when we're talking about communicating at a different level, where we could look at a different approach?"

When asked what Ambulance NB or the Department of Health has to say about his concerns, McBride said they're focused on addressing the issue now.

And while he agrees that it should be a priority, he feels there are other ways to achieve this common goal.

"I understand the need for bilingual paramedics. But there are other options out there, such as automatic translation devices. We already have a help-line already on every unit," he said.

"My issue is that this is about patient-care. If we have qualified people there, we should be putting them into the position to address the language issue as we go, hopefully through more training."

McBride said he's heard there could be as many as 50 or 60 vacant positions scattered across the province.

"They can't fill them because they don't have qualified bilingual paramedics. They've got qualified paramedics, but they lack the language capabilities," he said.

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