

## Make EMS an essential service, say paramedics

Move would save lives by sending labour issues directly to arbitration

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Dan Robson  
Staff Reporter

Toronto paramedics want the province to declare them an essential service, arguing it will save more lives.

The Toronto Paramedic Association (TPA) made the statement yesterday shortly after a tentative agreement was announced in the city's 35-day strike.

As an essential service, labour issues involving paramedics would go directly to arbitration, as with police officers and firefighters. They would also be given the ability to retire early because of the physical demands of the job, said Roberta Scott, a TPA spokesperson.

The city strike was particularly trying for Toronto's paramedics, who came under scrutiny after witnesses said it took it more than 30 minutes to respond to Jim Hearst, who lay dying of a heart attack in his apartment building as neighbours tried to save him on June 25.

Bruce Farr, chief of Toronto EMS, maintains it took paramedics 9 minutes to respond to Hearst, and that they delayed entering the building because of unspecified health and safety concerns.

Scott would not comment on the Hearst case specifically, but did say "several incidences" during the strike had prompted the association to lobby for essential service distinction.

"It's frustrating that the powers that be, (who) can actually make a change, are not listening," Scott said of the ongoing effort to have EMS deemed an essential service. "We hope they are listening now."

A 53-second average increase in EMS response times for high-priority calls during the strike also raised alarm, prompting the city to file an application to the Ontario Labour Relations Board for an increase of 22 ambulances on weekdays, and 27 more on weekends during the strike.

The Ontario Paramedic Association (OPA) is joining the TPA in lobbying the government for the change, which would make EMS an essential service across the province. Currently, EMS is not considered an essential service in any province, but was recognized as a public safety occupation by the federal government in 2005, said Glenn Gillies of the OPA.

"In Ontario every paramedic is considered to be not-essential, and that puts the public safety and security at risk because that means that there is potential that paramedics will not be there during labour disruptions," Gillies said yesterday.

A senior adviser to Peter Fonseca, the minister of labour, said an application would have to be filed to the Ontario Labour Relations Board.