

# Medical services strained as calls for drunks climb

Change in how police respond to intoxicated people blamed by officials

by Shane Magee

Northern News Services

Yes, you're hearing more sirens than before.

There has been a growing number of medical calls the city's ambulance service has answered the past year partly as a result of a change in the way RCMP respond to intoxicated people, and the affects are rippling out through the city's emergency services and shelters.

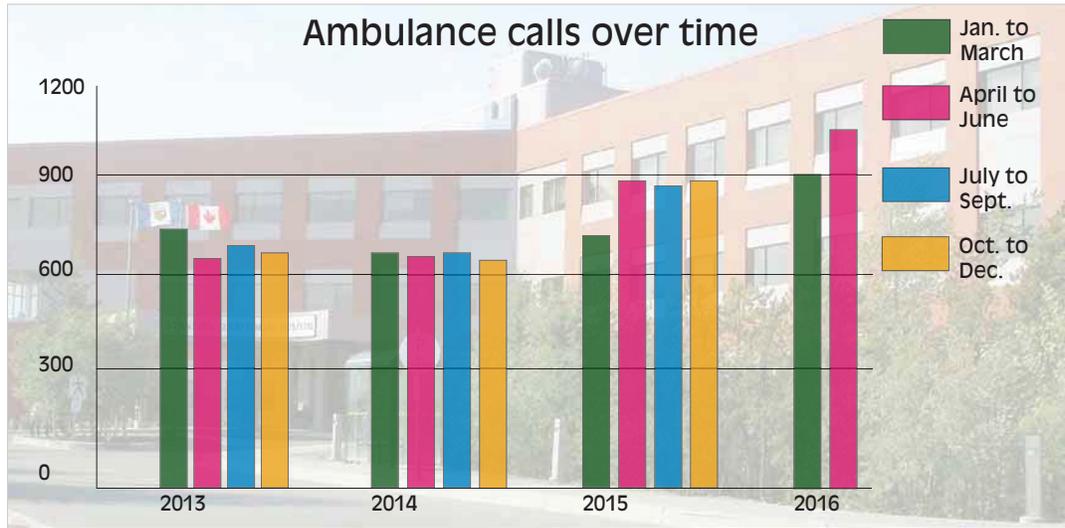
"We've had a drastic increase in ambulance calls for service and it's primarily due to intoxicated people," said Dennis Marchiori, the city's director of public safety.

Such calls for drunk people have increased threefold over the past year, he said. To compare, the number of medical calls has historically increased by one to two per cent per year.

The 1,019 medical calls in April to June was 12.85 per cent higher than the first three months of the year and well above the five-year average for that period of 698 medical calls.

At times this means the department's three medical vehicles are all responding to calls which can delay responses to other calls.

Yellowknife Centre MLA Julie Green was downtown recently when she spotted a man asleep in front of the post office. She approached



The number of calls for an ambulance in Yellowknife has been climbing over the past year driven by a threefold increase in calls about intoxicated people. It's also putting more strain on Stanton Territorial Hospital, shown in the background.

and tried to find a pulse.

"I found one and just assumed he was sleeping off the effects of drunkenness," Green said.

When she came back 10 minutes later, an ambulance was there.

"We seem to be just stuck in a cycle of just providing emergency services to people who don't need them," she said.

Medical calls tend to make up more than three-quarters of the fire department calls. The calls are starting to affect crew training and maintenance of fire department vehicles, Marchiori said.

With several very busy weekends recently, he said the volume of calls is also taking a toll on the firefighters themselves, who are trained and serve as medics.

Marchiori links the increase to a shift in the way RCMP respond to intoxicated people.

"I think we're getting more

calls directly ... from people that used to call the RCMP," he said.

Yellowknifer reported at the start of the year how police had decided to no longer respond to all calls of intoxicated people and would instead direct people to shelters instead of holding them in RCMP cells.

The move was aimed in part at shifting police resources to other issues, RCMP Insp. Matt Peggs has said. Shelter administrators and community leaders have agreed RCMP

cells aren't the place for those who aren't criminals.

The calls also affect Stanton Territorial Hospital's emergency room, though not all ambulance calls result in someone being transported there.

"In a way, that's kind of brought the whole issue back to light because it's now being downloaded onto the health services," said Dr. David Pontin, the director of Stanton Territorial Hospital emergency department about the RCMP shift.

With police holding fewer people in cells, one of the only options when finding a person passed out is to call an ambulance to make sure he or she is OK.

When an ambulance is dispatched, medics have to ensure there's no underlying issue that's caused them to pass out, such as a heart attack. When they get to the emergency room, doctors are in the same position. When the only diagnosis is intoxication, it means an ER bed has

been used for that person and the time of medical providers is occupied ensuring there's nothing else wrong.

Depending on the level of intoxication, the person may need to stay until they are deemed OK for release back onto the street, Pontin said.

The ER has seen a roughly nine-per-cent increase in visits so far this year compared to the same time period last year, he said. He cautioned that ambulance drop-offs only represent a fraction of people in the ER.

"What's the emergency department supposed to do? This isn't an emergency issue. This is likely an addictions issue," Pontin said, who has worked in the hospital's emergency department for 10 years.

"There's been no action that I have seen of any substance at the municipal or territorial level to actually deal with this problem and frankly it is simply intensifying," he said.

He suggested that the best solution would be to establish a place for people not in need of medical attention to sleep off whatever they've ingested.

Green said the community has not properly figured out how to address the issue of publicly intoxicated people.

"What we have are people who are addicts, who are intoxicated," she said. "They don't need police help or medical help. What they need most often is a place to rest off their drunkenness."

Mayor Mark Heyck has asked city administration to examine the costs of starting a safe ride program that would answer calls for intoxicated people not in need of medical attention. If approved, that could make its way into the city's 2017 budget.

"That's not enough for Green.

"The question is in Yellowknife, where would you take them?" she said.



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