



## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

### **Ambulance Paramedics issue public warning of “triple threat” as holidays approach**

#### ***Two health crises and 75 per cent of BC is still without full-time ambulance service***

Vancouver, BC – As ambulance paramedics approach their busiest season, Ambulance Paramedics of BC is warning the public of a “triple threat.” The union representing the province’s 4,500 ambulance paramedics and medical dispatchers says COVID19 protocols may compound mental health and addiction issues during the holidays – a time of year that can already be lonely for people – and emergency care for patients may be impacted due to critically low staffing among paramedics and dispatchers.

Shane Sander is a primary care paramedic in Surrey: “Shift vacancy is the highest it has ever been. When we come to work, the first question we ask one another is: ‘How many ambulances will stay parked today due to staffing shortages.’ The holidays will certainly test ambulance resources and resilience.”

Troy Clifford, president of Ambulance Paramedics of BC, says, “Physical, emotional and psychological exhaustion have set in among ambulance paramedics and dispatchers. We are coming onto one year of responding to the global pandemic and almost five years since the province declared an overdose emergency. These double health crises are already threatening our frontline emergency medical services, and the triple threat is that our profession is experiencing recruitment issues and an increase in stress leave, which has created a critical shortage of staff. We are worried about members of the public feeling greater isolation over the holidays or using drugs alone and not having access to immediate medical care and transport to hospital.”

Last week, the BC Coroners Service revealed that 162 people died of overdoses in October. That is five deaths per day. APBC is asking the public to frequently check in with family and friends who may be vulnerable and encourage anyone who may be using drugs to do it with someone else present.

#### **75% of BC does not have full-time ambulance service**

Clifford says in addition to burnout, retention and recruitment are at a breaking point. “What British Columbian’s may not know is that 75 per cent of the province relies on an on-call service model, meaning there’s no full-time ambulance service. This model makes retention and recruitment of paramedics a challenge because they don’t get meaningful compensation – only \$2 per hour during an on-call shift with the hourly wage increasing only if they tend to an emergency or transfer a patient between health facilities.”

Although there are significant staffing shortages in urban and metropolitan areas, there is a major shortage in rural, remote and indigenous communities, according to APBC. On-call paramedics cannot support their families, so they choose to move on to other professions.

Because ambulance paramedics have the most advanced lifesaving skills and training among frontline responders – and the only ones who can transport to hospital – Clifford says resolving staffing shortages needs to be a government priority.

#### **Too many shifts left vacant**

In October and November, APBC says there were communities who each had more than 50 vacant paramedic shifts, leaving them with no immediate ambulance response on some days. Paramedic Kristi Schmitz works in

the rural community of Haida Gwaii: “I was on shift every day from September 3 to October 16 to ensure that my community had coverage. This is not sustainable.”

APBC says paramedics and medical dispatchers are having to do significant overtime to cover shifts, and frequently they work their entire shift going to back-to-back emergencies without a break or downtime, only to do it all over again. Being a paramedic requires physical, mental, and emotional resilience, as medical emergencies can be chaotic with family members witnessing it all unfold and time being critical.

“Our colleagues are incredibly resilient, but the stresses paramedics and dispatchers are facing are at an all-time high. More than ever, we are seeing them reach out for help because their coping skills are being tested and they are psychologically exhausted,” said Lindsay Kellosalmi, Mental Health and Wellness Coordinator with the Ambulance Paramedics of BC.



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**Media Inquiries (call, text, or email):**

**Renu Bakshi** 604 787 1873 or [renu@renubakshi.com](mailto:renu@renubakshi.com)

**Troy Clifford**, President of APBC, at 250 319 4713 or [troy.clifford@apbc.ca](mailto:troy.clifford@apbc.ca)

