Student paramedics heal staffing shortages in a COVID-19 era Ontario



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By Michael RileyLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter

The COVID-19 pandemic has put an enormous strain on businesses' staffing levels, especially on the front lines. One of these beleaguered positions are paramedics. But with a new regulation change by the government last Friday under the Ambulance Act, the Ontario Association of Paramedic Chiefs is now able to hire second year students who have almost finished their degrees to boost their staffing levels to fight the pandemic.

Retired chief Paul Charbonneau is the executive director of the OAPC. They've been working with the deans of college programs and the ministries of education and health to come to a resolution to be able to hire students for their ambulance services during this pandemic.

?That was good news in bolstering our staffing. The projections are getting better but we were concerned at one point that we could have lost up to 50 per cent of our paramedics to COVID-19. So that was a tool the government gave us, with the amended regulation that we were happy to receive,? he says.

June MacDonald-Jenkins is the dean of the School of Health, Human and Justice studies at Loyalist College. She is also the provincial paramedic liaison for all 19 paramedic programs in the province. This year, in collaboration with all 19 programs in the

province and chief Ben Addley of the OAPC, all the paperwork to post marks and determine who is done was done early, to mobilize these students to enter the workforce more quickly. This and other innovative completion strategies were taken to the Ministry of Colleges and Universities and the Ministry of Health for approval, and the whole process took about three weeks.

?Some have already graduated and are now working full time, while the remaining 20 students who are yet to complete, they will hopefully take on a new student paramedic role announced by the provincial government on Friday. They will continue to be supervised by our faculty and will complete their final competency outcome attainment in two to four weeks. We are currently working closely with paramedic services to get these final 20 students out and completed in the weeks and months ahead,? she says.

Rhodri Lloyd is a student paramedic who completed his placement in the Hastings Quinte region. He starts work in May in this region, meaning he will be working out of stations from Bancroft to Belleville, Trenton, Madoc and Picton during the pandemic.

His journey into emergency services began as a volunteer Firefighter in South Frontenac Township, a position he still holds. Through that, he became interested in EMS as he found himself assisting paramedics at various emergencies.

Though his placement was completed before COVID, he offers that there have always been hazards for paramedics regarding infectious disease and the protocols to go with it.

?Through my placement it was a shared responsibility of crew members to evaluate the need for additional protection through combining dispatch information as well as what the patient tells us to determine the risk to us and the public for various other pathogens. It has always been common practice to err on the side of caution when dealing with an infection hazard, and if in doubt we always take the time to don extra equipment to protect ourselves and the patient. Since the development of the pandemic, I anticipate as I return to the road, using screening protocols to identify symptoms, and to outline when and which protective equipment shall be worn,? he says.

Although he is not currently on the road as a paramedic, he has been active as a volunteer firefighter during this time.

?When we respond to a medical incident, we wear full advanced PPE, including gown, mask, glasses, face shield and gloves. This combined with the information Dispatch relays to us, serves to protect us and to determine the most appropriate treatment for the patient. While we still run mostly the same emergencies as before, we are dealing now with another dynamic to our assessment, which is to identify and control the risk that our patient is COVID positive while still delivering the care needed,? he says.

MacDonald-Jenkins says that many, about 50 per cent of the completed graduates, including Lloyd, have joined the local Hastings Quinte service, while the others have been posted to positions across the province.

?We are very excited to be able to share the student paramedic role creation, just recently announced. It's an incredible change to regulations, allowing students an opportunity not previously afforded in the existing legislation. This changes the way we view program completion, delivery possibilities and once again shows the great collaboration between Ontario colleges, the Ontario Association of Paramedic Chiefs and the two ministries,? she says. ?This was truly an incredible effort by all areas to place work force mobilization as a priority during these unprecedented times.?