

Paramedics? mental health paramount

By Sarah Sobanski

The Government of Ontario is prioritizing mental health for emergency service workers.

The province is partnering with the Paramedic Association of Canada (PAC) to support quality mental health standards for its emergency service workers. It's investing \$199,970 to identify and address the psychological strains and resulting impacts on first responders.

"Culturally, it was more difficult to come forward and talk about some of the challenges. It was kind of seen to be a suck-it-up attitude in the previous 20 years or however long. There have always been challenges there," said Hastings-Quinte Paramedic Services chief Doug Socha. "There's always been paramedics and other emergency services that have always had to deal with psychological stress. I think now, a lot of that is starting to come to the forefront, and everybody as a community, as a paramedic community, as an emergency services community, is starting to recognize that we need to be addressing the challenges that are out there."

PAC and the Paramedic Chiefs of Canada (PCC) represent two cross-Canada membership groups for paramedics that further the development of the profession in the country.

The province's investment will focus on identifying psychological hazards, control measures, awareness, reduction of stigma and harassment, and reduction of psychological harm factors in workplaces. It will develop a psychological health and wellness standard.

"This new standard will certainly help guide employers in developing psychological health strategies for the benefit of paramedics," said Socha.

The chief noted that Hastings-Quinte Paramedic Services has been actively participating in studies helping research wellness concerns for paramedics.

"There's actually a study going on right now that our service is participating in. That project is there to document the human resources profile for paramedics and allow strategies to be measured," said Socha. "This is one of the projects recognizing that psychological health and mental health is obviously a big concern in the first responder community."

He added, "Paramedics, along with other emergency services, are exposed to significant events. Whether they're physical trauma, pediatric emergencies, fatalities, major car crashes and certainly, that has an effect on them."

These types of events can cause post-traumatic stress, or PTSD as it is more commonly known, and empathy fatigue where it can be difficult to respond emotionally to everyday occurrences. There are many ways to treat these conditions. The primary being therapy, with supplementary treatments like [weed concentrates](#) or anti-anxiety medication assisting in several ways. There is no one-size-fits-all practice when it comes to mental health, thus support has to be of a wide variety.

"We need to support our staff in a number of different strategies in order to help them through these pretty challenging times that they have experienced."

Socha has recently returned to Hastings-Quinte Paramedic Services after a three-year term with the Centre for Security Science. There he helped develop a stronger working relationship between Canadian governments and emergency services workers and to improve service abilities.

Hastings-Quinte Paramedic Services will be training up to 25 senior members of staff in peer-to-peer support when addressing first responder such as mental wellness.

"Hastings-Quinte Paramedic Services started in 2002. We've been actively engaged not only in our community, but as a family on the paramedic side, and also with our emergency service partners. There's sort of an emergency service family," explained Socha. "A lot of our frontline paramedics will interact and talk with each other in times of stress and even within the hospital sector. When there's major calls that go on, as a community we get together and talk about what's hapened and how people are feeling about it." workplaces among the safest in the world.