

Fleet and Equipment Services closure:

Municipalities to pay more for ambulances and ambulance equipment

The Ontario Ministry of Health and Long Term Care plans to end bulk buying of ambulances and ambulance equipment, a move that will cost Ontario municipalities tens of thousands of dollars per vehicle.

Former Conservative Health Minister Tony Clement announced in July 2003 that the Fleet and Equipment Services section of his Ministry would close on March 31, 2004. That decision was delayed by the change of government, but the Ministry told workers on April 1 that the warehouse on Judson Street in Etobicoke would close and most of its work would end.

Quality equipment at cost

Fleet and Equipment Services (FES) provides ambulances and ambulance equipment to municipalities at cost. It buys truck chassis from auto companies, puts out tenders for the conversion of ambulance bodies, and purchases and installs all types of ambulance equipment, e.g., cots, stretchers, fracture boards, and ventilators. By careful tracking of the demand for ambulances and medical equipment across Ontario, FES can predict the quantities that will

be needed each year and thereby buy in bulk, getting the best possible prices for all equipment. FES provides about 100 to 150 ambulances to municipalities each year. All of Ontario's upper-tier municipalities use the service.

"The announcement of the closing of the Judson Supply centre while predictable, is regrettable," according to Ernie Jones, Manager of Land Ambulance for Haldimand County. "My years of experience working with the staff at Judson have taught me that their services can never be replaced. Small communities such as ours will suffer under the load of purchasing vehicles and equipment at inflated prices. I'm convinced that the cost for ambulances, equipment, and even advice, will spiral upwards with little or no controls."

Since the downloading of ambulance services took full effect in 2000, the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care has barred Fleet and Equipment Services from bidding on tenders put out by municipalities. This has led to extra costs. In one case, the city of Toronto ended up buying 50 cots at a price \$18,000 higher than the FES price.

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Technical help for Ontario municipalities

The workers at Judson Street have considerable administrative and technical expertise. Staff work directly with manufacturers to correct problems identified by municipalities. Fleet and Equipment Services staff are experienced in ensuring that ambulances are built and equipped according to provincial regulations.

It is unclear if this part of the service will continue.

The value of the service was underscored during the SARS crisis last year, when it was responsible for buying N-95 masks for all of Ontario outside the GTA. Using their connections, staff there acquired hundreds of thousands of masks and shipped them quickly to major cities like Ottawa that desperately needed them.

Fleet and Equipment Services will no longer do purchasing of any kind.

Municipalities oppose the closure

Ontario municipalities have continued to buy from Fleet and Equipment Services

because they know the prices are better.

The Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) is not happy with the elimination of this service.

The loss of Fleet and Equipment Services will create extra costs for many municipalities, who will be forced to set up new procurement arrangements. Most municipalities will be forced to assign staff to learn and do this highly technical work. Most municipalities will pay more for equipment.

Taxpayers lose, Tory wins

The only beneficiary of the closure of Fleet and Equipment Services will be the private company that sees the closure as the elimination of a competitor.

The main lobbyist in favour of the closure has been Sheldon Sturrock, whose company, Allied Medical, also provides ambulance equipment to municipalities. Sturrock is a Tory activist and supporter of former Transportation Minister Frank Klees.

Interestingly, the two companies that sell the most ambulance equipment to the province are in favour of keeping FES as it is, noting

that it reduces administrative cost for them and for municipalities.

Action needed

Fleet and Equipment Services provides a service that municipalities like because it saves them significant money and gives them guaranteed quality, expert technical help, and the assurance that their ambulances and ambulance equipment are up to provincial standards.

This service must be saved. OPSEU is asking the Ontario government to take the following steps:

- reverse the closure decision and commit to keeping FES open and fully functional.
- permit FES to bid on municipal tenders for ambulances and ambulance equipment.
- guarantee the FES budget so staff can work on orders for delivery in the upcoming year.