This page was exported from - Shelburne Free Press
Export date: Sat Oct 31 7:41:06 2026 / +0000 GMT

Dufferin paramedic service reduces time lost to offload delays

Written By JOSHUA DRAKES

LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER

The Dufferin County Paramedic Service (DCPS) reached milestones over the last year that bode well for the service into the future.

Gary Staples, the county's chief paramedic, said health care has experienced a number of pressures when county council met on April 23. That reality extends across all health service branches, from paramedics to acute care, long-term care, and home care.

?All of these pressures and financial constraints do have this sort of downstream effect where people are left with limited options for health care,? he said. ?In the end, it typically relies on 9-1-1.?

Paramedics pick up people and ferry them to a hospital, even though it is recognized that it isn't often the most appropriate place for those people to receive care, he said.

But it is their only option.

?These ongoing pressures kind of fuel the fire of other issues that we have such as offload delay at hospital, Code Zero,? Staples said.

Offload delay refers to times when paramedics can't transfer patient care to the hospital emergency department staff. It forces patients to sometimes linger for hours on stretchers due to emergency department congestion. That congestion may be caused by the presence of patients who don't need to be there.

A Code Zero occurs when no ambulances, or only one, are available to respond to 9-1-1 calls in an area. Similarly, a Code Red refers to a shortage in which one to three ambulances are available to respond in a large jurisdiction.

?So we're bringing more patients into (the emergency department) that don't need to be there, and that's driving our call volumes up and other issues that we're experiencing in hospital,? Staples said.

Councillor Chris Gerrits, Amaranth's mayor, asked if there is an acceptable number of hours lost by paramedics due to offload delay.

Staples said a paramedic service's goal is to lose no hours to offload delays. But, given the current circumstances, that goal just isn't achievable.

?We're going to have offload delay,? he said. ?We're going to have times where we have no ambulances. I think we just need to continue to work with our partners to try to improve processes and ensure that we do have ambulances clearing quickly.?

According to a 2025 service evaluation, operational performance remained strong. DCPS met or exceeded legislated and council-approved response time standards across all Canadian Triage and Acuity Scale (CTAS) categories.

Call volume and patient transports continued to trend upward in alignment with demographic growth and an aging population, with residents aged 65 and older accounting for nearly half of total calls.

Despite ongoing healthcare system pressures, DCPS achieved measurable improvements in hospital offload delay, reducing lost paramedic hours by 16 percent compared to the previous year.

Coun. Philip Rentsch, who is also the Grand Valley's deputy mayor, said the county's paramedics lost about 300 hours through offload delay. He asked what that would be as a percentage of hours over a year.

Staples said the total hours for 2025 would be 40,000 hours.

?It is a very low percentage,? Staples said. ?I think the better comparable is the number of transports resulting in offload delay. At about 19 per cent of the time, we are at 30 minutes or greater [when] transferring patients at the hospital.?

And that's a reasonable number.

?The majority of the time we are less than one hour,? he said. ?It would be nice to be under 30 (minutes) all the time but we can't always prevent times where we have a large number of ambulance going to the hospital at one time.?

Thirty minutes is the provincial standard, he said.

Staples said resources such as the Medical Priority Dispatch System (MPDS), which has been implemented in Dufferin County over the last year, will help prevent times of ambulance shortages.

Implemented in December, the MPDS introduces a standardized, clinically validated approach to emergency medical call-taking that improves triage accuracy, resource prioritization, and pre-arrival instructions.

It is said to enhance patient safety, support evidence-based decision-making, and the system contributes to sustainability and improved management of service pressures.

The dispatch system complements a completed Paramedic Service Masterplan and Service Delivery Review that provides a forward-looking roadmap to guide service delivery, workforce planning, infrastructure development, and response strategies in the context of population growth and increasing call complexity, particularly in expanding communities such as Orangeville, Shelburne, and Grand Valley.

The review reinforces existing strengths while identifying opportunities for targeted enhancements, data-driven decision-making, and operational innovation.

The Community Paramedic Program continued to play a vital role in supporting vulnerable residents by providing care in patients' homes and connecting them with appropriate community and healthcare resources.

The program completed more than 2,000 in-person visits in 2025 and benefitted from extended provincial funding, ensuring continuity of care for those most in need while reducing unnecessary emergency department visits.

Overall, 2025 reflects a year of stability, innovation, and readiness for the future. With strong partnerships, dedicated staff, and a clear strategic direction, the county's paramedic service remains well-positioned to meet the evolving needs of the community while maintaining the highest standards of care.

?Providing more options for individuals in our community to access appropriate health care at the right time is really the way to go,? Staples said.