

# Chapter 17

## Saskatchewan Health Authority—Delivering Accessible and Responsive Ground Ambulance Services in Southwest Saskatchewan

### 1.0 MAIN POINTS

By November 2023, the Saskatchewan Health Authority made some progress toward implementing the last remaining recommendation from our 2016 audit about accessible and responsive ground ambulance services in southwest Saskatchewan (i.e., Swift Current and surrounding area).

In 2023, southwest Saskatchewan had about 46,000 residents and the Authority received about 4,500 ambulance calls.<sup>1</sup> For residents living in an urban centre (e.g., Swift Current), the expected ambulance response time is within 9–30 minutes (depending on the severity of the patient’s condition) and the rural response time is within 30 minutes.

In November 2023, the Authority implemented a new IT dispatch system that includes data it can use to report on ambulance service quality. Also, the Authority now has performance-based contracts, which include response time expectations, in place for all five contracted ambulance service providers in southwest Saskatchewan.

The Authority expects the new IT system and updated contracts to support better information about service quality for monitoring and reporting (e.g., whether ambulances in southwest Saskatchewan responded to patient calls within 30 minutes).

The Authority plans to have an annual Emergency Medical Services report available to the public and senior management for the 2024–25 fiscal year that will include performance information such as ambulance call volumes and response times. This will help Authority management decide where to adjust services to support quality patient care. Such reporting can also enable the Authority and the public to monitor whether ambulance service providers meet the expectations set out in their performance-based contracts.

### 2.0 INTRODUCTION

#### 2.1 Background

Ambulance services are a critical component of the provincial healthcare system, providing patients with emergency lifesaving treatment and transport to necessary levels of care. Ambulance services stabilize and improve patients’ conditions at emergency scenes, as well as during transfers to and between healthcare facilities.

Having ambulance services provide rapid response times help save patients’ lives and mitigate harm. A combination of quick transport times with the provision of the appropriate level of care contributes to the best outcomes for patients.

<sup>1</sup> Information provided by the Saskatchewan Health Authority.



Under *The Provincial Health Authority Act*, the Saskatchewan Health Authority is responsible for the planning, organization, delivery and evaluation of the health services that it provides. This includes delivering accessible and responsive ground ambulance services to people of Saskatchewan as outlined in *The Ambulance Act*.

The Ministry of Health remains responsible for the strategic direction of the healthcare system and for *The Ambulance Act*.

Accessible and responsive ambulance services can be challenging because of the geographic spread and remoteness of some communities in rural Saskatchewan, including around Swift Current and its surrounding area. In 2023, this area had a population of about 46,000 people, spread over a land mass of approximately 44,000 square kilometers with one urban centre, Swift Current, with a population of almost 19,000 people.<sup>2</sup>

To provide the Ministry-established target of a 30-minute ambulance response time for rural areas, the Authority located ground ambulance operators in various places including in and around Swift Current. As of December 2023, this area had 12 ambulance services using a mix of Authority-owned ambulances and contracted ambulance service providers (seven owned and five contracted). This number has remained unchanged since our original audit in 2016.

## 2.2 Focus of Follow-Up Audit

This chapter describes our third follow-up audit of management's actions on the recommendations we made in 2016.

Our *2016 Report – Volume 2*, Chapter 25, concluded that, for the period from September 1, 2015, to August 31, 2016, the former Cypress Regional Health Authority had effective processes to deliver accessible and responsive ground ambulance services, except for the areas reflected in our seven recommendations.<sup>3,4</sup> By December 2021, the Ministry of Health and the Saskatchewan Health Authority implemented six of the seven recommendations.<sup>5</sup> This included response time monitoring by management of all ambulance operators in southwest Saskatchewan, but response time information did not get reported to senior management, the Board and the public.

To conduct this audit engagement, we followed the standards for assurance engagements published in the *CPA Canada Handbook—Assurance* (CSAE 3001). To evaluate the Authority's progress toward meeting our recommendations, we used the relevant criteria from the original audit. Authority management agreed with the criteria in the original audit.

To carry out our follow-up audit, we interviewed key Authority staff and examined documentation about its new IT dispatch system implementation project and ambulance service contracts.

<sup>2</sup> Covered Population/Saskatchewan Health Coverage Reports/By Regions and Communities. [opendata.ehealthsask.ca/MicroStrategyPublic/asp/Main.aspx](https://opendata.ehealthsask.ca/MicroStrategyPublic/asp/Main.aspx) (25 October 2023).

<sup>3</sup> In 2017, the Cypress Health Region became part of the Saskatchewan Health Authority. The former region covered the southwest part of the province including Swift Current and surrounding area.

<sup>4</sup> *2016 Report – Volume 2*, Chapter 25, pp. 123–142.

<sup>5</sup> *2019 Report – Volume 2*, Chapter 39, pp. 293–301 and *2022 Report – Volume 1*, Chapter 18, pp. 195–200.

## 3.0 STATUS OF RECOMMENDATION

This section sets out the recommendation including the date on which the Standing Committee on Public Accounts agreed to the recommendation, the status of the recommendation at November 30, 2023, and the Authority's actions up to that date.

### 3.1 New IT Dispatch System Implemented, But Reporting Not Yet Developed for Monitoring Ground Ambulance Service Times

***We recommended the Saskatchewan Health Authority report to senior management, the Board, and the public actual results against key measures to assess the success of its ground ambulance services at least annually.*** (2016 Report – Volume 2, p. 141, Recommendation 7; Public Accounts Committee agreement February 26, 2019)

**Status**—Partially Implemented

The Saskatchewan Health Authority implemented a new dispatch IT system in November 2023, but had yet to finalize the nature and timing of reporting for monitoring the success of its ground ambulance services. Neither the Board, senior management, nor the public received reports on key measures (e.g., response time, ambulance crew hospital time) related to the delivery of ground ambulance services at November 2023.<sup>6</sup>

The Authority expects to have reporting in place in 2024–25. Such reporting can inform strategic decisions needed to provide quality delivery of ambulance services for southwest Saskatchewan.

We reviewed documentation about the Authority's new IT system and found it includes a data analytics module the Authority can use to develop measures to report on ambulance service quality. For example, the Authority could use the system to report on actual ambulance response times against expectations.

The Authority updated its performance-based contracts, which include response time expectations, with all five contracted ambulance service providers in southwest Saskatchewan. For example, for residents living in an urban centre (e.g., Swift Current) expected ambulance response time is within 9–30 minutes, depending on the severity of the patient's condition, and rural response time is within 30 minutes.

The Authority expects the new IT system and updated contracts to support the provision of better information about service quality (e.g., whether the ambulance service providers meet the expected response times).

Authority management noted that it plans to create an annual provincial Emergency Medical Services report in 2024–25 that will include performance information such as call volumes and ambulance response levels. This aligns with information available in other jurisdictions. For example, Ontario provides the public with regional response times and call volumes annually to demonstrate whether ambulance service providers are meeting

<sup>6</sup> Ambulance Crew Hospital Time is the time from when an ambulance crew arrives at a hospital emergency department until that crew is available to respond to another call.



their response time targets. At November 2023, the Authority did not have a summary report that showed how many times ambulances did not respond to patients within the expected response time (e.g., within 30 minutes) in southwest Saskatchewan, or what the longest response time was.

Periodic measuring and reporting on key performance results would enable better strategic oversight of the quality of the Authority's ground ambulance service delivery. Authority management can then adjust services where necessary to provide the best outcome for patients. Such reporting can also enable the Authority and the public to monitor whether ambulance service providers meet the expectations set out in their performance-based contracts.