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No money for catch-up: Hospitals can't afford to clear up patient backlog once strike ends

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The Telegram

The backlog of patients whose surgeries and diagnostic appointments have been cancelled is steadily growing as the provincial civil-servants' strike enters its fourth week.

But unlike in previous years, when health-care boards could clear up backlogs by having staff work overtime after labour disputes ended, the executive director of the Newfoundland and Labrador Health Boards Association says that probably won't happen this time because there simply isn't enough money.

John Peddle said Tuesday he's not certain how long it will take to clear up the backlog once the strike -- which includes hospital support staff -- ends.

NO OVERTIME

"Right now, I can say to you that there will be no overtime to clear up the backlog," Peddle said.

"What will happen is once the strike is over, those patients who are on our list needing procedures will be identified on a priority basis and we will deal with them based on our capabilities.

"There will be no extra shifts, no extra work done, because the money is not there in the budget. I can't give you an answer how long it will take to clear up the backlog for the simple reason that our capabilities or our abilities to clear up the backlog are going to be limited based on no money for overtime and stuff like this."

The province's 14 health boards were given notice in last month's provincial budget that restructuring would take place

this year.

The province plans to create new regional integrated health authorities and has said that community health services will be combined with institutional and nursing-home services to create a single, accountable authority to ensure people have access to the care they need.

Boards have been instructed to review their operations for efficiencies in an attempt to reduce the province's deficit. Some health projects that were already underway have been cancelled, and a complete review is being undertaken of all provincial health services.

Peddle said some people believe the strike is saving government lots of money in terms of salaries, but little if any money is being saved in the health-care system.

Managers working around the clock to fill the void left by striking employees have to be compensated, he said, and when essential workers are called in, their hours are logged and their pay is deposited into a fund with their union.

Some management personnel have worked more than 10 to 12 days straight during the strike, Peddle said.

"What we're trying to do now is move them from, say, a heavy workload area to a lighter workload area to give them a break."

Peddle said the health boards association is monitoring the situation and the biggest concern is patients who have conditions that are becoming more serious as they wait for treatment.

"Several of our organizations now are putting together sort of an action plan to try to identify those patients that have not been seen in our organizations, that are becoming urgent and will eventually become emergencies," Peddle said Tuesday.

"That's happening today and tomorrow, and we'll try to identify exactly what procedures they need and see what we can do with them. We've probably got a dozen or more

(operating rooms) closed down across the province and procedures are not being done."

Once priority patients are identified, the health boards will determine the types of procedures required and whether they have the human resources available to do the work.

"If not, we will identify what we need and we will go to the union and ask point blank: this is what we need for, say, the next two days. Or, this is what we need to look after patient X -- will you provide those services?" Peddle said.

The Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Public and Private Employees (NAPE) has co-operated "fairly well" in the past in a couple of such situations, he said, and he hopes the union will continue to offer assistance.

Since the strike began, provincial health-care facilities are getting hundreds of calls a day -- including from striking workers who are frustrated and anxious to get back to work.

Meanwhile, the Newfoundland and Labrador division of the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), said Tuesday it's concerned about people's access to mental-health services during the strike.

Executive director Geoff Chaulk said some scheduled outpatient appointments are proceeding, but some other appointments have been cancelled.

He said the CMHA is worried about mental-health consumers who have to cross picket lines -- which can be anxiety-provoking and stressful -- in order to receive services.

Chaulk said there are already lengthy waiting lists for mental-health services in the province and he's worried about how the service disruption could lengthen waiting periods.

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Note(s):

On Strike

Illustration(s):

Photo: Joe Gibbon, The Telegram
Striking Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Public and Private Employees (NAPE) Local 4211 member Lloyd Winter of New Wes Valley in Bonavista Bay proudly waves the Newfoundland flag during the singing of Solidarity Forever at a rally on Confederation Hill on Tuesday afternoon.

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