

October 18, 2012

Via Fax and Email

Mayor Allan Georget
Town of Spirit River
PO Box 130
Spirit River T0H 3G0

Dear Mayor and Council:

RE: Imminent Closure of Edmonton City Centre Airport to Medevac Air Ambulance Flights

The **Save Our medevac Service** society has been formed by several medical doctors, medevac pilots, and rural advocates to protect quality medevac air ambulance services in rural Alberta and northern Canada.

We are writing to inform you of an urgent situation regarding severe disruption of medevac air ambulance services to your community and to seek your assistance.

Accessible Hospital Care for Serious Injuries and Specialized Care

Alberta's health care delivery system in rural and northern Alberta relies on a combination of fixed wing and rotary wing medevac air ambulances to quickly deliver patients needing critical time-dependent care to tertiary care hospitals.

As you may know from your own experience with health care delivery in rural communities, Edmonton's tertiary care hospitals—the Royal Alexandra Hospital and the University of Alberta Hospital—are the primary tertiary care facilities for hundreds of thousands of Albertans living and working in central and northern Alberta.

Because of this, Edmonton's tertiary care hospitals are critical to our health care delivery system.

The use of medevac air ambulance flights into the City Centre Airport is an essential link in our health care delivery system. It is the essence of what defines accessibility for rural and northern communities especially patients injured in serious accidents, those with critical illness, or needing timely access to specialized care.

The current city centre medevac landing strip is uniquely located just 5 minutes from the Royal Alexandra Hospital and only 13 minutes by ground ambulance from the University of Alberta Hospital.

In two months, on December 15, 2012, all fixed wing air ambulances will have to stop landing at the Edmonton City Centre Airport and relocate to Edmonton International Airport near Leduc, Alberta.

We need to be clear and honest about what will happen if this move occurs.

In some cases, critical patients will not survive the delays in transportation times. In others, the delay will cause patients to endure greater adverse health effects and complications. All of which is preventable under the current service.

Health Quality Council of Alberta Report

A recent independent study by the Health Quality Council of Alberta (HQCA) found that in 2010 there were 3,059 Alberta patients delivered by fixed wing medevac air ambulance to Edmonton's City Centre Airport. 1,779 of these patient deliveries (58%) were classed as critical or 'time-dependent'.

According to the HQCA report, the close proximity of the Edmonton City Centre Airport to two primary tertiary care hospitals has resulted in Edmonton providing the best medevac delivery time in Canada.

From Best to Worst

The HQCA report found that moving the medevac flights to the Edmonton International Airport (EIA) will significantly increase the transport time for patients. The long distance for ground ambulances to travel through traffic from the international airport to the tertiary care hospitals will result in more than a 35 minute delay in patients receiving care even under ideal traffic conditions -- an additional delay that is unnecessary and life-threatening.

The report found that the move away from the City Centre Airport will cause us to have the worst medevac transport time in Canada.

Here are the reasons the HQCA cited in their report:

- poor international airport location -- it will take longer for flights arriving from the north to sequence and land at the busy international airport;
- long taxiways -- the EIA's long and sometime congested taxiways will cause additional delays;
- more ground travel distance -- the EIA's location so far south of Edmonton's tertiary hospitals will cause delays for ground ambulances;
- ground ambulance route must use most congested highway in Alberta – Highway 2 north of Leduc is the busiest and most congested highway in Alberta and is often the scene of accidents, construction, and poor weather conditions that brings traffic to a crawl;
- congested roads within Edmonton leading to hospitals – there is no ability for ground ambulances to overcome the dozens of traffic lights and other traffic congestion once the ground ambulances arrive at the city limits;
- delays in air crews returning to airport – the long distances and congestion associated with the medevac EMTs returning to the airport will delay the entire medevac system; and
- commercial aviation and medevac a bad mix – other jurisdictions avoid having medevac air ambulances fly into busy commercial airports.

Overburdening STARS

Some have suggested that STARS helicopters could be used to solve the problem by having the STARS air crews use the two Edmonton-based helicopters to shuttle patients from fixed wing air ambulances landing at the Edmonton International Airport to Edmonton hospitals. However, burdening STARS with shuttling upward of an additional 1,800 time-sensitive patients annually is not feasible.

Shifting STARS' role over to an airport shuttle service takes away from STARS' mission of responding to critical accidents and other emergencies.

Also, the need to disconnect patients from the fixed wing aircraft's infusion pumps, respirators, and other life-saving equipment and reconnect them to the STARS helicopter will further delay patient transport and affect care.

Furthermore, unlike the fixed wing air ambulances landing at the city centre airport, rotary aircraft are unable to fly during icing and other adverse weather conditions. The HQCA report noted that STARS was forced to cancel 206 missions in 2010 because of weather factors.

And finally, there are range and speed limitations with helicopters relative to the speed and distance of fixed wing air ambulances.

STARS is an excellent and growing component of our medevac system but it's not feasible to expect STARS to replace the thousands of fixed wing medevac flights into Edmonton from across Alberta, our neighbouring provinces, and the northern territories.

Solutions to this Provincial Health Care Issue

The citizens within your community have the right to equivalent access to the provincial health care services that currently exist. We know that the Alberta Government has both a legal duty and the needed authority to ensure that medevac flights can continue to land at this location-critical airport. This is a health care issue and as such, it is a provincial issue. Respectfully, it is not a "City of Edmonton" issue.

Acting now to keep Edmonton's tertiary care hospitals accessible to timely medevac air ambulances will help avoid preventable deaths and impaired health outcomes.

Think about this:

The City of Edmonton owns the roads at the emergency entrances to the Royal Alexandra and the University of Alberta hospitals just as it owns the airport lands. Imagine that the city decided they wanted to close these roads that they own, delaying people's access into the emergency room.

Would this be acceptable? No, the province would need to step in to keep emergency care accessible.

That is what the Alberta Government must do to stop the imminent loss of medevac flights at the City Centre Airport.

The Alberta Government needs to hear from all of us who are concerned about the loss of effective and timely medevac air ambulance service.

And not only does the government need to hear from rural communities and those in the north but as important, the Government of Alberta needs to hear from all Albertans and especially those who live in the City of Edmonton.

The severe disruption to medevac services due to unnecessary relocation has gone unnoticed by most of the general public due to assumptions, misinformation, and others airport issues such passenger consolidation.

Albertans are people who care about their families, their neighbours, and their communities. They need to clearly understand the imminent life-and-death consequences that come with diminishing the quality of medevac services.

Equipped with this knowledge, Albertans will demand that the Government of Alberta take the steps to keep the service running at the same level as it does today, even if that means keeping the airport open for medevac air ambulances. The Government of Alberta has the legal tools to act—we need to create the imperative for them to do what is right.

We ask that your municipality write, email and phone the Premier and the Edmonton MLAs about this issue. We ask you to urge your community groups and citizens to follow your lead. And as important, everyone needs to contact their friends and family who live in Edmonton to inform them about what is happening and to ask them to help. Ask them to help protect our medevac service. Ask them to contact the Premier and the city MLAs.

We are planning other activities and we will be in further contact with you. We encourage you to visit our website www.SaveOurMedevac.ca for more information and updates.

In the meantime, I would be pleased to discuss this important issue with you or to answer questions you or your municipal officials may have.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Save Our medevac Services Society



Dr. Kerry Pawluski, M.D.
President

Attachment: Health Quality Council Report (via email)