
AUTOMATIC AID FUNDING AND LEGISLATION

Purpose

To respond to growing emergencies, Renfrew County recommends a provincially endorsed Automatic Aid Agreement between Paramedic Services, with clear activation criteria, shared governance, funding, and operational support for faster, coordinated response.

Proposal

To establish a formalized framework for automatic support to municipalities during large-scale emergencies. This system would be triggered based on predefined criteria (e.g., damage severity, number of households without power, or infrastructure collapse). Under this framework, neighboring municipal resources would be automatically deployed, reducing response times and ensuring that resources are available without delays due to bureaucratic processes.

Review and reform the minimum spend percentage and other related criteria required for municipalities to qualify for provincial financial assistance during large-scale emergencies. The goal is to make the criteria more flexible and responsive to the actual costs incurred during these events, and to provide clearer guarantees of financial support. Implement a system that provides assurance of financial support for municipalities based on impact metrics rather than arbitrary spending thresholds.

This system would ensure that financial support is available when it is most needed, without requiring municipalities to go through a complicated process to justify expenses.

Why Now

In March 2025, a catastrophic ice storm struck central and eastern Ontario, with Haliburton County experiencing 25 millimeters of ice accumulation. The storm led to massive power outages (affecting more than 7,500 customers) and caused significant damage to infrastructure, including the failure of the Ontario Ministry of Health Central Ambulance Communications System in Lindsay, preventing access to 911 services and emergency dispatch capabilities.

The County of Renfrew Paramedic Service deployed its Sierra Team and other resources to assist Haliburton County. The deployment lasted from March 30 to April 6, 2025, and involved 18 Sierra Team members, operating in 14 periods of 12-hour shifts. Their contribution included:

- 164 patient contacts across various services, including emergency department support, mobile medical clinic operations, and Community Paramedic wellness checks.
- The deployment provided critical medical support in overwhelmed emergency departments and innovative solutions like a Virtual Triage and Assessment Centre (VTAC) at the S.G. Nesbitt Memorial Arena.
- Community Paramedics conducted wellness checks on vulnerable populations, helping to identify individuals at risk and distribute essential resources like oxygen.

The success of this deployment underscored the value of inter-municipal cooperation, where neighboring municipalities (Renfrew County in this case) provided vital resources to a jurisdiction in need. The lessons learned from this experience highlighted several key areas for improvement in emergency response, such as the need for:

1. Earlier mobilization of support for wellness checks and patient assessments.
2. Enhanced tracking and coordination of resources, including better documentation and accountability systems.
3. Automatic support systems for municipalities facing significant emergency situations, ensuring a faster, more organized response to unexpected disasters.

Throughout the deployment, the County of Renfrew Paramedic Service faced uncertainty over whether the costs incurred would be reimbursed through the provincial financial assistance program. Municipalities are often required to meet a minimum spend percentage threshold before qualifying for provincial support. However, given the unpredictable nature of large-scale weather events, meeting this threshold can be an unreasonable burden for municipalities which lack the resources or capacity to deploy vast numbers of personnel and equipment in the short term.

The absence of an automatic financial support system leaves municipalities in a precarious position, where they may hesitate to request the help they need due to uncertainty over financial reimbursement. As demonstrated by the Haliburton response, the speed of mobilization and the scale of resources required often exceed the ability of local governments to meet rigid financial conditions, further complicating efforts to respond effectively.

The response to the Haliburton County ice storm illustrates the importance of automatic support systems for responding municipal resources and highlights the challenges posed by existing minimum spend criteria for provincial financial support. To ensure that municipalities can effectively respond to large-scale emergencies, it is imperative that the province revises its financial support mechanisms and implements more flexible, transparent, and automatic support structures. This will enhance emergency management capacity, improve coordination, and ensure that municipalities have the resources they need to protect and serve their communities during crises.