

Tehkummah First Response returns to service with virus protocols

By **Warren Schlote** - May 20, 2020



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TEHKUMMAH – The Tehkummah First Response team is fully back in action as of May 14 after updating its protocols and obtaining extra personal protective equipment (PPE) to defend against COVID-19, with the approval coming through its partners at the Manitoulin-Sudbury District Services Board (DSB).

“It was a good process. There was certainly some back-and-forth using guidelines from the (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), the Ontario Ministry of Health and other input in a continual review-and-edit process with the DSB. They certainly worked co-operatively with us to ensure that our two priorities were met, which is the safety of our responders and the safety of the patient,” said John Greenway, community emergency management co-ordinator (CEMC) for the Township of Tehkummah and a member of the First Response.

Rob Smith, chief of paramedic services at the DSB, said the resumption of full service is a win for both sides and the community of Tehkummah.

“We’re thrilled to be working with them and we’re happy we can do it in a manner that’s safe for them,” he said.

Part of the issue that led to the suspension of First Response activity except for cardiac calls was that 9-1-1 callers would need to be screened for COVID-19 symptoms. If they were unable to be screened over the phone, the responding parties would have to take all precautions as though that individual was COVID-19-positive. That requires a considerable amount of PPE, so the First Response team was told to attend only the most urgent of calls involving cardiac arrest.



Now, with more PPE supplies on hand at the First Response and the Tehkumma Volunteer Fire Department (including fit-tested masks and training on the proper use of all equipment), local first responders are able to attend those calls where a patient's COVID-19 status is unknown.

The Tehkumma team will not be dispatched if a person is determined to likely be COVID-19-positive but may still attend the scene to provide assistance away from the patient, according to Mr. Greenway.

Negotiations and training have been ongoing since the Township of Tehkumma declared the First Response an essential service.

The reason the First Response team is so critical in a place like Tehkumma is its rural location away from medical services. Community-based first responders have a higher chance of arriving at the scene before paramedics and they work to provide immediate basic care until paramedics can take over.

The First Response team will now attend calls with face masks, eye protection, a protective suit and gloves. They have been trained on performing a preliminary assessment on the patient and only two responders will directly contact the patient.

The DSB was able to provide a fair amount of PPE but the Tehkumma crew managed to get more on their own.

"(Team member) David Siberry did an excellent job in terms of sourcing through people and companies he knew, and he really increased our inventory to a good comfortable level," said Mr. Greenway.

Those sentiments were echoed by Tehkumma Fire Chief Jeff Wilson, saying that Mr. Siberry was "on the phone non-stop."

The Tehkumma crew has also been trained on daily self-screening for symptoms of the virus.

Mr. Smith of the DSB said he was happy that the talks had resolved and stressed that Tehkumma was never without protection during the negotiation phase.

"They're doing a wonderful job for their community; we acknowledge that, but to have them out there in this time of a pandemic, in harm's way, we couldn't do that until we made sure they had the appropriate equipment and were properly trained and comfortable with that equipment," he said.

Local first response teams are a holdover from the 1980s and 1990s when the Ministry of Health's mandate included land ambulance services. These teams were fostered in areas with less access to paramedic services. The number of first response teams has diminished in recent years, said Mr. Smith, citing about two or three per district still in operation.



First response teams are part of the tiered response system. When a call comes in, the dispatcher will send out the most appropriate emergency service but also invoke other services as the situation requires. Tehkummah's team responds to an average of 30 to 50 calls a year.

