

Veterans building to be staffed, along with dialysis, cancer treatment



Karen MacRury-Sweet, director of heart health and critical care, discusses some of the plans that Capital Health will have in place in the event of a strike. Standing next to Sweet are Barbara Hall, vice-president of person-centred medicine, and chief of surgery Dr. David Kirkpatrick. (TED PRITCHARD / Staff)

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Emergency services will remain in the event of a walkout at the region's largest health district, but Capital Health administrators admit services would suffer in "days, not weeks or months," in the event of a strike.

"The pent-up demand for all the other things in the community, for the elective surgeries that would be cancelled, that pressure will get larger and larger," said Barbara Hall, Capital Health's vice-president of person-centred medicine.

"We don't feel we could endure . . . a very long strike."

The 3,600 health-care workers employed at various medical facilities, including the Queen Elizabeth II Health Sciences Centre in Halifax, the Cobequid Community Health Centre in Lower Sackville and Dartmouth General Hospital, could be on strike as of 12:01 a.m. April 25.

Local 42 of the Nova Scotia Government and General Employees Union represents medical lab technologists, practical nurses, pharmacists, recreational and respiratory therapists, operating room technicians, ward aids, diagnostic technicians and others.

The union and the employer reached an earlier agreement to provide emergency care in the event of a labour disruption. The plan calls for 100 per cent staffing at all emergency rooms and the Camp Hill Veterans Memorial Building in Halifax.

"We are going to be open for emergency cases throughout. We are not going to ever turn someone away who's an emergency," Hall said.

Urgent and outpatient care for those receiving dialysis, chemotherapy and radiation therapy will also continue during a strike.

On Wednesday, Capital Health launched a three-phase plan to deal with a labour disruption, including beginning to move 120 people waiting for long-term care into nursing homes.

In the days leading up to a strike, Capital Health's chief of surgery said elective and non-emergency procedures will begin to be curtailed and cancelled if a strike occurs.

"We want to make sure we have as few people in the hospital as possible" during a strike, said Dr. Dave Kirkpatrick.

There are about 9,000 people on wait lists for various medical procedures and surgeries and Capital Health expects to defer about 104 a day during a labour disruption.

Those in line for heart surgeries during a strike will be assessed as to their seriousness, said Karen MacRury-Sweet, director of heart health and critical care.

"The cases that would be done we'd consider the most urgent," she said.

"If we felt there was a compromise to a patient . . . we would make contact outside the province. We have a good handle on who's waiting for (open heart surgery and other procedures) and we sort them based on how sick you are."

Administrators said private clinics and other medical facilities are not generally an option as they are not set up to deal with critically ill patients.

Hall said there is a process in place to transfer patients out of province, but it is not something being considered except in the most extreme circumstances.

Talks broke off after three days of conciliation last week. The conciliator then filed his report on Tuesday, launching a 14-day countdown period to a possible work stoppage.

Nova Scotia Government and General Employees Union president Joan Jessome said Wednesday that the union is also preparing its members for a possible walkout.

She said the health authority's roll-out of its strike plans may shake some.

"I think they're going to be affected by the announcement today," she said. "Today we're a day closer to going out."

Jessome said the last strike countdown at Capital Health was in 2001.

"This is new ground for many of the workers," she said.

The union has asked for a 5.1 per cent raise in the first year to match an arbitrator's award for registered nurses and cost of living increases for the remaining years of a three-year contract. The employer offered one per cent for each of the three years.

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About the Author

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