

Sunday, 7 October 2007

[Print](#) | [Close](#)

Overtime crisis hits ambulance service

Sonya Neufeld

AMBULANCE officers in Canberra are "stretched to-the-limit" and doing "ridiculous" amounts of overtime because of a chronic skills shortage, the industry says.

The claim comes after The Daily Telegraph revealed the NSW ambulance service was in the grip of a \$100 million overtime crisis as officers faced lengthening shifts caused by clogged emergency departments.

The Sydney newspaper reported that the number of overtime hours worked by ambulance officers had surged 60 per cent since 2003.

The Transport Workers Union, which represents ambulance officers in the ACT, said the situation was just as dire in the territory.

Union official Ben Sweeney said overtime was a massive issue for the ACT Ambulance Service and officers were now expected to work excessive hours regularly.

"It plays a component in their ordinary shift duty and because they're so stretched to the limit, officers are too often forced to endure ridiculous amounts of overtime, just like in NSW," he said.

He said the skills shortage meant officers were often forced to work on days off, facing shifts of up to 14 hours.

Mr Sweeney said while the strain was impacting on roster arrangements and affecting ambulance officers' ability to take leave, it was not affecting patient safety "in any way".

"Ambulance officers go the extra limit and do the extra work to ensure patients are cared for at all times in the ACT," he said.

"That is paramount to them at all times.

"What it does affect is their own health and well-being and their ability to have sufficient rest and a work-life balance like the rest of us."

He said he believed the Stanhope Government was "doing well" to try to address the issue.

In its 2007-2008 Budget, the ACT Government allocated \$4.2million over four years to recruit 16 more ambulance staff. It has also budgeted \$800,000 for overtime and provided four more ambulances.

ACT Emergency Services Minister Simon Corbell said the Government was aware of the growing demand on ambulance services in recent years.

"Like most ambulance services in Australia, overtime is one of the strategies employed to ensure appropriate crewing levels are maintained, particularly to replace staff unavailable to roster from short-notice unscheduled absence," he said.

Demand for ambulance services jumped by 7.8 per cent during 2006-07 compared to the previous financial year. In the year before, it swelled 16.5 per cent.

Mr Corbell said earlier this week three new staff joined the territory's 128 full-time officers.

The ACT Government and the union are negotiating a new certified agreement.

The Canberra Times

Copyright © 2007. Rural Press Limited