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THIS WEEK

Ambulances slower in '04



By Jason Magder
The Suburban

Ambulances routinely do not respond to calls in most suburbs within the medically accepted time of eight minutes and 59 seconds, figures obtained by *The Suburban* reveal.

This marks the second year in a row that ambu-

lance wait times have increased in the suburbs.

Out of the 22 former municipalities covered by *The Suburban*, a full 14 cannot rely on Urgences Santé ambulances to arrive within the medically accepted delay.

Ambulances were slowest this year in Roxboro, Ste. Geneviève, Île Bizard, Côte St. Luc, Ste. Anne de Bellevue and Baie d'Urfé — all of which

showed a marked slowdown over last year's response times. Ambulances arrive in those areas within 11 to 15 minutes of a call for the most critical emergencies. Response time in Pierrefonds remained unchanged at an average wait time of 11 minutes and 36 seconds, while figures for

See **RESPONSE** page 9

Gagliano responds to new allegations.

— page 4

Response

Cont'd from page 1

Senneville and Pointe Claire were not available.

Ambulances were also significantly slower in seven other sectors: Anjou, Montreal East (which includes Rivière des Prairies), Montreal North, Beaconsfield, Dollard des Ormeaux, Île Bizard and St. Laurent.

Dorval, Westmount, St. Leonard, Hampstead, Kirkland, Town of Mount Royal and Montreal West saw ambulances respond to emergencies more quickly, while Pierrefonds and Senneville were unchanged. However, Pierrefonds, Senneville, Dorval and Montreal West residents still do not receive ambulances within the medically accepted limit of nine minutes.

Urgences Santé, Laval and Montreal's ambulance authority says despite the increase for specific areas, the overall response time has remained generally unchanged over the year. In fact, Urgences Santé's average response time last year was eight minutes and 24 seconds, which is significantly lower than the ambulance authority's goal of getting to calls in eight minutes and 59 seconds.

The slow response times of ambulances highlights the need for advanced-care paramedics, who are still banned in the province. Urgences Santé assistant director Guillermo Fuentes said that many patients are no longer rushed to the hospital closest to the scene of the accident if that hospital is not the best one to deal with the emergency in question. For example

trauma emergencies in the West Island are not generally sent to the Lakeshore General Hospital, but to the Montreal General's trauma unit, so West Island residents can spend a long ride time in ambulances.

Neither Fuentes nor Urgences Santé spokesman André Champagne would comment on the use of paramedics, since the ambulance authority is in discussion with the government on the future of that program.

Fuentes explained that the way that the ambulance system is designed, service at the ends of the island is always slower because the ambulance fleet is concentrated in areas where the most calls are received.

"Ste. Anne de Bellevue, for example, is a 30-call per year system. When you have 30 calls per year, nobody will put an ambulance there. The costs would be prohibitive."

Fuentes said that only having a first response system in place across the island will improve the response times in an area like Ste. Anne de Bellevue, because the first responders would be stationed in the area.

He said there are no plans for the ambulance authority to add new ambulances.

"I would wait to see how the first response is deployed to see if there will be a need for more ambulances," Fuentes said. "[Response time] can be better, but they will be better in the next few years as we improve the system. We'll be better. When an island-wide first response system is deployed, it will be something to see." ■