

Access to Helicopter-Based Air Ambulance Service for All Albertans

Issue

The Government of Alberta currently provides funding through Alberta Health Services (AHS) to the following helicopter-based air ambulance service providers:

- Shock Trauma Air Rescue Society (STARS) from bases in Calgary, Edmonton and Grande Prairie, and
- Helicopter Emergency Response Organization (HERO) from Fort McMurray.

While providing adequate coverage to large regions in Alberta, it still leaves communities, including larger cities like Lethbridge and Medicine Hat, without secure, life-saving air ambulance service to these rural and remote areas in southern Alberta. The Government of Alberta and AHS should ensure the whole province is equitably covered by government-funded Helicopter Emergency Medical Services (HEMS).

Background

STARS received formal recognition as an air ambulance service in 1988, after launching its original life-saving service in 1985, and has served Calgary and area since then. A base was added in Edmonton in 1991 and then in Grande Prairie in 2006. In 2015, STARS celebrated 30 years of care with 29,000 missions carried out in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba.¹

In 1996 STARS Emergency Link Centre was opened and serving as a 24-hour emergency medical communications centre offering timely information to emergency service providers for critically ill and injured patients. AHS currently contracts STARS Emergency Link Centre to dispatch all Helicopter-Based Air Ambulance service in Alberta.²

In 1991, Phoenix Heli-Flight provided helicopter medevac services to the Wood Buffalo region and, in 2013, the HERO Foundation was established. Since their inception, over 500 medevac missions have been flown.³

HALO Air Ambulance, based out of Medicine Hat, has been providing helicopter medevac services to southern Alberta since July 2007. Since their inception, they have flown over 750 medevac missions.^{4,5}

Both STARS and HERO receive funding through AHS for their operations, with STARS receiving one-fifth of their operating costs and HERO receiving one-third through government funding. HALO Air

¹ www.stars.ca History, STARS Emergency Link Centre and How We Are Funded.

² Ibid.

³ www.localherofoundation.com History and How We Are Funded.

⁴ www.haloairambulance.com About

⁵ <https://globalnews.ca/news/6943972/halo-air-ambulance-funding-alberta/>

Ambulance does not receive any government funding for their services, with all funding raised through donations.^{1,2,3}

Government-funded HEMS became increasingly important to Southern Alberta when HALO announced in May 2020 that it would have to cease operations on July 1, 2020 without government funding or significant donations. Thankfully the funding was raised by donations to keep operations going.⁴

HEMS provides a vital and timely emergency service to remote areas outside of a conventional ambulance's quick response area and areas inaccessible by vehicle and comes with substantial operating costs. The operating cost of a helicopter-based air ambulance service varies between the providers between \$3,000,000 (\$250,000/month) to \$10,000,000 (\$830,000/month) annually.^{5,6}

On November 22, 2019, AHS started a Helicopter Emergency Medical Service (HEMS) Review to look at a consistent structure, operating guidelines, and funding for all HEMS providers across the province to benefit all Albertans. The goal of the HEMS review was to evaluate existing services and identify service gaps. The HEMS review process is complete, is being reviewed by AHS leadership and AHS notes that they should have more information to share soon on

<https://together4health.albertahealthservices.ca/HEMSEngagement>.⁷

The Alberta Chambers of Commerce recommends the Government of Alberta:

1. Immediately publish and make the Helicopter Emergency Medical Service (HEMS) Review report public;
2. Commit to providing equitable funding for all HEMS providers across the province; and
3. Ensure that all communities in Alberta have access to timely, life-saving, helicopter-based air ambulance service.

¹ www.stars.ca History, STARS Emergency Link Centre and How We Are Funded.

² www.localherofoundation.com History and How We Are Funded.

³ www.haloairambulance.com About

⁴ <https://globalnews.ca/news/6943972/halo-air-ambulance-funding-alberta/>

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⁷ <https://together4health.albertahealthservices.ca/HEMSEngagement>