

BFRS Management and Fire Service Association Settle Labour Dispute Ahead of Tribunal

The Labour dispute between the Bermuda Fire and Rescue Service (BFRS) Management and the Fire Service Association (FSA) has been settled ahead of arbitration. The two parties have reached an agreement which allows for the FSA members to operate safely, but will inherently hinder the island's medical coverage.

After over a year of frustrations and not being satisfied with numerous meetings between the FSA and BFRS management and various members of Government, members of the FSA voted to take action. A Labour Dispute was filed by the FSA Executive on November 12th, 2021 with 21 days notice of intended industrial action, short of a strike, set to take place on December 3, 2021. The FSA was demanding that either the manpower was provided to safely operate, or the vehicle response would be adapted to allow safe response, which meant taking the ambulance out of service. A day before the 21 days was set to expire, the dispute was sent to a Tribunal. Yet to receive a date for appearance, the settlement which was reached outside of arbitration, saw the sides agree to terms of the FSAs intended action to operate the vehicles based on manpower per shift, effective Monday, December 20, 2021. Meaning that when crew numbers do not safely allow it, the Fire Service ambulance will be out of service for that shift, and KEMH ambulances will be responsible for medical coverage of the entire island.

Under the existing conditions of service, the fire service requires at least 17 personnel to safely operate 4 vehicles between the 3 stations - 3 fire trucks with 5 personnel each, and 1 ambulance with 2. Current practice sees the crews operate at times with as little as 12 personnel. The result is severe compromise to standard of care, and to the health and safety of the firefighters and members of the public. Under no circumstances, should a firetruck ever be manned with two personnel as it sometimes is at the Clearwater Station, as the potential risks can be fatal. Two EMTs on an ambulance should also not be expected to work 15 hour or more shifts where they operate in dual capacity, from providing care and transporting patients to the hospital, to battling fires, floods, accidents and hazmat incidents, to name a few. On top of that, the load Bermuda's essential service workers carry has been particularly exacerbated by the pandemic.

Over time and due to many different variables out of our control, the situation has gotten worse and we have been our own worst enemies by continually making it work with less. This has got

to stop. At the risk of burnout and many stress related illnesses, or worse, fatal errors caused by these circumstances, we must make a stand and demand our own lives are considered. We too have families and loved ones that we want to make it home to at the end of the day.

Our budget continues to be cut, our equipment continues to expire and not be replaced, and our risk and expectations continue to grow. We've seen other essential services recruiting and having their voices heard while we are told there may not be any additions made for us, but rather more cuts and potentially closing of stations. We have been too quiet for too long. This is our stand. We feel it is time the public is made aware of the Fire Service's plight. Many do not know that we solely operate the ambulance in the Eastern end, and we are the largest group of EMTs on the island. Even with this action, we will continue to provide medical response on the firetrucks. We also feel the public should know that their coverage is being jeopardized due to budget constraints and disputes over health and safety. The members of the FSA have battled with this decision to prioritize their own health and safety for the bigger picture as they are burdened with guilt that they will be letting their country, and in some instances, their own families down. This ultimatum should not exist and the responsibility to fix this should rest with the powers that be.

We are asking for fairness. For example, provisions are immediately granted to prevent a disruption of operations at the L F Wade International Airport due to lack of manpower in the Airport Operations Division of the Fire Service. We take that to mean that the airport is more important than the health and safety of Bermudians, and we will not accept it. We believe as tax paying citizens, Bermudians have a right to equal medical and fire coverage island wide.

We, the members of the FSA, wish to serve our community and to provide the highest level of protection, and will continue to do so within the limits of our own health and safety. We only ask that our voices are heard and something is done to protect our members.