

Southlake garage fire had ripple effect for emergency response team



Southlake Regional Health Centre is still assessing the damage stemming from an alleged arson in their parking garage on July 20 which resulted in a 28-year-old Vaughan man charged with arson and two counts of assault on a police officer.

But, thanks to a quick response from the Southlake team, the cascading impacts resulting from the fire kept the impact on patients and operations to a minimum.

“As a 24/7, 365 critical facility, we obviously have an emergency management system that allows us to respond to various incidents that might pose a threat to our business operations and I think what was unique [about July 20] was the requirement to respond to multiple simultaneous incidents,” says John Marshman, Vice President of Capital Facilities and Business Development for Southlake Regional Health Centre. “I think the training we put in place and the systems we put in place were really what we relied upon to get ourselves through it.”

The team was notified of the incident at 9.45 p.m.

As Central York Fire Services and York Regional Police responded to the fire in the parking garage, Southlake's emergency personnel and others were focused on addressing issues within the building related to the incident.

“We immediately implemented a Code Grey Air Exclusion, effectively a procedure to lock down outside air going into the building to prevent any entrainment from that air and those contaminants from getting into our patient spaces and causing issues that way,” says Marshman.

While this was underway, they were also notified of a flood in their systems on the sixth floor as a pressure relief valve gave way and unleashed a “substantive” amount of water that infiltrated the five floors beneath.

This flooding, in turn, hit a telecom room, taking down the phone system.

“We have a fire that is being responded to in our parking garage, and [that's] obviously unavailable and a key resource for patients and staff to access the site,” says Marshman. “We have a flood, which requires response to each of six different areas to mitigate the source, to assess and contain any water that has infiltrated into those other spaces. With our phone system having to respond now to re-mapping our entire communications protocols and establish downtime procedures to ensure that not only can we communicate

internally between those key functions and also to communicate it to the outside world.?

Gayle Seddon, Director of Southlake's Ontario Community Health Team, likened both healthcare and the response to what Southlake's Derek Rowland described as "the perfect storm" of issues as a "team sport" where everyone needs to communicate.

The phone system, she says, was critical to operations, keeping doctors in the loop on patients, communicating test results, and ensuring families can connect with our loved ones.

"Our coms team sent out a lot of information on social to tell people our phones were down so families and staff didn't get worried," she says. "Another important thing is with our partner organizations, if you have a heart attack in your home, you need to get to Southlake's cardiac team as quickly as possible and there is a phone call to make that happen. We quickly flipped to our downtime procedures - all our partners in the EMS knew what that number was. Should anyone be unfortunate enough in the community to have a heart attack, we were perfectly ready to provide the care they need."

Helping to steady the ship was Johnny Grajcar, the hospital's Director for Support Services, who jumped in as the security lead. Assembling the team in 45 minutes, there were two key tasks at the outset: assessing the current situation and "figuring out how to mobilize the various areas" - and some of the learnings from the pandemic helped, he says.

"It was having the virtual teams to speed up the process and not have any delays," he says. "We had our calls both clinical and on the facilities side join in. From that point, we were able to establish what are the critical pieces we needed to do right now to ensure safety for our staff, but primarily for our patients."

It was a winning formula to what is hoped to be a one-off event.

The team is proud that the Southlake Emergency department remained open throughout and the hospital was never on re-direct.

"Within 45 minutes, we were assembled on site and able to leverage the structure to direct what was obviously a multi-faceted response, including the appropriate security and facilities personnel to manage the interface with Fire Services; the entire team of environmental service workers to respond to six different locations along with facilities operations personnel to make sure the water was contained, to make sure we were able to establish or solve the problem at the source, and ensure any issues with our clinical operations were clearly understood so the team could put together their response," says Marshman.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter