

Paramedics' wait-for-police policy should be examined: Mayor

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[Toronto on strike](#)

Melissa Leong, National Post

Mayor David Miller expressed concerns Friday about ambulance delays and said a policy that enables paramedics to wait for police before responding should be examined after Jim Hearst's death.

"I'm concerned that what happened might possibly indicate weaknesses in the system well beyond the stresses brought about by a strike, and I think it's important that we have an outside investigation so Torontonians know that it is impartial," he told reporters.



The mayor re-emerged after four days of silence at a press conference where he also said that the city will seek "every legal remedy" including injunctions to stop strikers from blocking city workers who want to cross the picket line.

On June 25, four days into the civic workers' strike, Jim Hearst collapsed in the lobby of his downtown apartment and paramedics, according to witnesses, took about 40 minutes to reach him while he died of an apparent heart attack.

Bruce Farr, Toronto's Chief of Toronto Emergency Medical Services, said that paramedics arrived within nine minutes of the call, but were "staged" outside or waiting for police because of an undisclosed "health and safety" concern. According to Chief Bill Blair, two other ambulances were also "staged" in the city.

Mr. Miller said it was "extremely important" that the Ministry of Health was investigating the incident.

The mayor appeared at times unsettled by reporters' questions at City Hall Friday. Outside, protesters who were frustrated by the 26-day-old strike chanted, "Toronto's had enough" while pickets circled the entrance.

Earlier, demonstrators with the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty stormed Mayor Miller's office, upset about reduced access to social assistance during the strike. The city has been unable to process special claims such as the special diet allowance used by welfare recipients.

"There have been a number of instances of pickets not complying with the law," Mr. Miller said.

"Where there is evidence, we will pursue every available remedy including injunctions to ensure that Torontonians and city workers have proper and safe access to the work sites."

The city has already been granted two injunctions during the strike: one to allow workers to remove illegally dumped waste from outside of the Ingram Transfer Station and another so that they could spray the Christie

Pits temporary dump with pesticides.

Unionized workers have unsuccessfully tried to cross the picket line this week to return to jobs at two social services offices in Scarborough and Etobicoke.

When the workers who wish to cross the picket line arrived at the Etobicoke North Social Services at 220 Attwell Dr., near Pearson Airport, the strikers formed a human chain around the city building to keep them out.

“This is a strike against the most vulnerable Torontonians including social assistance recipients and children,” the mayor told the press conference.

“Negotiations are continuing but I have to say that I am extremely frustrated at the very slow pace of negotiations after the fair and reasonable offer the city made last week.”

Mark Ferguson, president of Toronto Civic Employees Union Local 416 CUPE, said the strike might not have happened had the city presented the offer it had tabled last week which "gave us something to work with."

“There has been nothing fair about the city’s proposals. Taking away our members’ accumulative sick plan is a huge concession,” he said.

“And the city is still trying to force senior employees out the door on layoff while junior employees remain on the job.”

Mayor Miller said back-to-work legislation would be “a significant error.”

“Back to work legislation results in arbitrated settlements. During the last arbitration, the settlement that was given was about 3%. A 3% settlement right now each year would not be affordable by the city... would probably mean that we would be required to cut services and possibly lay off the very people who got the 3%.”

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Photo: Toronto mayor David Miller addresses the media Friday, July 17, 2009 in an update on how contract negotiations are fairing in the city's ongoing labour dispute with members of CUPE. (Tim Fraser for National Post)