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## Staff and responders making progress in Slave Lake

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### Hospital will re-open in phases

*Story by Mark Evans*

Standing outside the Slave Lake Healthcare Centre Sean Chilton, Alberta Health Services senior vice-president of Regional Hospital, tries to imagine what it was like for staff as they evacuated patients Sunday evening.

"It truly is amazing," says Chilton. "If you see the devastation to surrounding buildings and how close the fire came to the property line of the hospital it must have pretty scary."

Slave Lake hospital staff evacuated 29 patients as the flames cut a swath through the community.

"It must have been a terrifying moment," says Chilton. "To see how staff responded to that and reacted is quite remarkable"

Staff had their own families' and homes to worry about, but they made sure the patients got out safely while parts of their community burned around them, he says.

Chilton is in Slave Lake as the liaison between the Town of Slave Lake's Emergency Operation Centre and the AHS Emergency Operation Centre as they work to make the town safe for residents to return.

"There's a lot of activity," says Chilton.

EMS, RCMP, fire fighters and workers with utilities like ATCO and Telus all working to restore services and safety to community. All the while water bombers and helicopters fly overhead as they continue to fight the wildfires.

A key role AHS has in Slave Lake right now is providing health services to the responders in the community.

EMS and a local physician are working out of a clinic at the Northern Lake College building. EMS is on standby in the event that they need to get someone out to a hospital in an emergency.

AHS is also working quickly to get the town's hospital, a critical piece of infrastructure, up and running as soon as possible.

The hospital wasn't touched by the flames.

"The hospital looks good," he says.

The building remains pretty much just as staff and patients left it right up to flowers still sitting on the desk of the nursing station.

However, there is very strong smell of smoke, and days of cleaning ahead for the contracted 46-member restoration crew before the hospital will be ready for patients again.

Air scrubbers and fans are starting the cleaning process to get rid of the smoke smell but every surface and piece of equipment in the facility – including linens, curtains, fridges and freezers - will need to be cleaned. Specialized techniques will be needed to remove the smoke smell from the paper in health records and all the supplies must be examined to see if they need replacing.

All this is essential to meet infection control standards and ensure patient safety, says Chilton.

There's a lot of work to do but progress is being made. Power, telephone and the network are back up in the building but there's still no natural gas or potable water.

It will be at least two weeks before the hospital will be entirely open, says Chilton. A phased approach may see the emergency department and a few beds open in about six days.

AHS staff and responders in the community are also making incredible progress.

"There is recognition of the importance of getting their community back on line as quickly as possible," he says. "It's really remarkable to see the amount of work that has already occurred in such a short period of time."

The dedication of the AHS staff from Slave Lake and surrounding areas working together with all the community responders is amazing, says Chilton. "For me, it's what makes the job worthwhile to see all these people working together towards a common goal," he says. "It just reminds you. You plan for events like these and hope that it never happens to you. The response of the staff is a true testament to the importance of planning but more importantly to the skill, dedication and courage of all staff when faced with such taxing circumstances."

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