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Kevin Donovan

ORNGE air ambulance boss Dr. Chris Mazza was paid \$1.4 million a year, making him the highest publicly paid official in Ontario.

The *Star* is revealing this after two weeks of stonewalling by the air ambulance service.

Health Minister Deb Matthews called Mazza's salary and others at the non-profit ORNGE "outrageous, shocking and unacceptable."

That salary puts him \$600,000 ahead of the highest paid hospital chief in the province and almost \$65,000 ahead of the president of Ontario Power Generation. Mazza left his post on indefinite medical leave Thursday, departing from the "crystal palace," the Toronto airport area headquarters where he once enjoyed a cold smoothie delivered to him at 3 p.m., fitness facilities and fine meals paid for by ORNGE.

Forensic auditors from the province, with orders from the health minister to "follow the money," have been sent in to his well-appointed ORNGE offices to find out if public dollars were misspent at the agency created to help sick and injured Ontario residents.

"When you consider the financial pressures in health care and the pressures on health-care workers, it is very hard to see taxpayers' money spent on outrageous salaries," Matthews said in an interview.

The *Star* obtained Mazza's current annual salary, but was unable to discover the salaries of at least five other top ORNGE officials. None is listed on the province's [Sunshine List](#). ORNGE said Thursday it has provided information to the province, but due to privacy laws cannot release the information.

Matthews, asked to comment on the salaries, would only say that, as of Thursday, she has all of the executive pay packages (including bonuses) at ORNGE, but privacy rules forbid her from releasing them. She would not provide Mazza's salary, but did say his was the most "outrageous."

The forensic auditors from the Ministry of Finance have been asked to determine how much of the executive compensation at ORNGE comes from public sources and how much from private. One former board member, who now works internationally for ORNGE, designed the compensation package.

Two weeks ago, the *Star* launched a series of stories on ORNGE, its founder, Mazza, and the level of care it is providing. The first story dealt with a spider web of for-profit companies that the non-profit ORNGE had created. In short, those companies had the effect of shielding top salaries from the public eye of the Public Sector Salary Disclosure List. The *Star* has also revealed that this web of companies created by Mazza has received \$6.7 million from the Italian company that sold helicopters to ORNGE.

ORNGE, in its defence, maintains that no public money has been used on any of its for-profit initiatives. It says it is not required to disclose salaries for that reason. A spokesperson said the money was raised by issuing bonds. What ORNGE will not discuss is where the interest payments to investors in those bonds are coming from. The forensic auditors will be looking to see if any of the \$150 million that taxpayers contribute to ORNGE each year pays that interest.

One of the for-profit companies Mazza created was called ORNGE PEEL. Wednesday, the peel began to unravel at a late-night meeting at the "crystal palace." Board members of the profit and non-profit (some people sit on both boards) met. Mazza had given talks via webcam and in a town hall during the week, telling employees that his attackers were jealous of him and that people were just not ready for the type of revolution in emergency medicine he wanted to bring Ontario. By late Wednesday evening, a decision was made that Mazza would take



Chris Mazza and the air service have been under fire after the *Star* revealed high salaries were kept from the public.

Ron Bull/Toronto Star file photo

medical leave.

Information in this story comes from documents and also interviews with ORNGE officials, pilots and paramedics. All are required to sign nondisclosure agreements. For that reason, the *Star* has provided them with anonymity. Thursday, at a town-hall meeting, ORNGE employees were once again reminded they must not talk to outsiders.

Once, Mazza was a simple emergency room doctor at Sunnybrook Hospital. He fell in love with the concept of the air ambulance and did some work for one of the small companies that provided medical flights to the Ministry of Health in those days. He told people there was a better way to provide air ambulance service.

By 2005, Mazza had convinced Liberal Health Minister George Smitherman to turn over the province's air ambulance system to him as a non-profit. All provincial assets were transferred to Mazza's non-profit (eventually called ORNGE because air ambulances are often orange) for a nominal fee of \$1.

In the words of provincial conservative critic Frank Klees, Mazza was an "empire builder." Klees raised the issues of lack of oversight on ORNGE over the past eight months in the legislature.

"(Premier) Dalton McGuinty and (Health Minister) Deb Matthews defended Mazza. They defended what was indefensible. Now it is time for Dalton McGuinty to take control of an out-of-control agency," Klees said Thursday.

The *Star's* investigation has found an organization in chaos. Well-meaning employees — from doctors to pilots to paramedics — are unhappy. Much of the focus is now on their for-profit business. A corporate plan describes how the for-profit companies will "leverage" the assets and success of the non-profit ORNGE. For using the publicly funded ORNGE, Mazza said he planned to pay back to the province 3 per cent of gross profits.

Middle managers, paramedics and pilots at ORNGE call the newly purchased office building near Pearson International Airport the "crystal palace." It has luxurious offices. At times there has been a personal chef to provide meals, sources have told the *Star*. And, for the finicky Mazza, an ice-cold smoothie at 3 p.m. There is a private gym for executives. Executive travel of late has included trips to Italy and Brazil.

The provincial auditor general is nearing the end of a year-long value-for-money audit of ORNGE. Among the issues he has been encouraged to look at is the blending of private and public funds at ORNGE.

In one case, an ORNGE charity purchased a high-end wakeboard boat, an Air Nautique. Mazza, whose 14-year-old son died in a ski accident in 2006, created a charity to help reduce injuries in extreme sports. ORNGE briefly considered purchasing a large, water-filled quarry near Kitchener and the boat was to be used for water sports for youth. The boat was put in storage for two years. ORNGE spokesman James MacDonald said the boat was hardly used and no public money was expended on its purchase.

The *Star* has tried for months to interview Mazza. He cancelled a recent plan for an interview Monday.

In an internal memo to staff Thursday morning from ORNGE chair Rainer Beltzner, the publicly funded air ambulance agency announced that president and CEO Dr. Chris Mazza has taken an "indefinite medical leave."

"The board of directors for ORNGE and ORNGE Global met last night and I am writing to inform all staff that Dr. Mazza will be on indefinite medical leave," the chair said in his memo to ORNGE employees.

In Mazza's absence, senior executive Tom Lepine will be interim president of the non-profit ORNGE, and an ORNGE vice-president, Maria Renzella, will be interim president and CEO of ORNGE Global, the for-profit entity.

"I ask that everyone respect his privacy and that of his family during this time," the chair said in the memo.

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