

ATTN : ASSIGNMENT EDITOR

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Cross-Province Hospital Cuts Cause Major Lay Offs, Privatization; Threaten Local Emergency Rooms, Birthing, Hospital Beds

Toronto/cross Ontario – The Ontario Health Coalition released a report detailing hospital cuts and restructuring plans now underway across Ontario.

« We are seeing the deepest and most widespread hospital cuts in more than a decade, » noted Natalie Mehra, coalition director. « The province has set funding levels for hospitals that are less than the rate of inflation for this fiscal year, dropping further next year. Hospitals cannot maintain existing programs and services at current levels of funding. The cuts we are seeing are disorganized, undemocratic and causing huge public backlash. »

« Most communities have spent the last 50 – 100 years to build their local hospitals and make services locally accessible, » added Helen Havlik, retired nursing director from the Petrolia hospital and a coalition member. « The government is going in the opposite direction, moving services out of local communities. For small and rural hospitals, once you move out the services that are being proposed in some communities, you no longer have a hospital at all.»

« The current government plan for hospital cuts and restructuring is saddled with similar flaws to the last round of restructuring that went over budget by billions of dollars while reducing services and compromising people's health, » Mehra warned.

Among the major findings of the report:

- Province-wide at least 50% of hospitals (75 hospitals) are, or have been in deficit this year and almost 70% (104 hospitals) are projected to be in deficit next year. Hospitals are forbidden to run deficits and must submit plans to eliminate them by the end of next fiscal year.
- Provincial funding for hospitals' global budgets is less than the rate of inflation for this year and next. It has been set at 2.4% for 2008/09 and 2.1% for 2009/10. At these rates, hospitals are unable to maintain existing programs and services. The government has provided a multi-step program to increase fees and cut services across the province.
- Cuts now proposed across Ontario include closures of Emergency Departments; closure of local birthing service; cuts to hospital beds and departments; essential closure of small and rural hospitals; privatization of physiotherapy, chiroprody and support services; lay offs and attrition to reduce the size of the hospital workforce; increased fees for patients and their visitors, and other measures.
- Emergency Departments are being restructured, closed, or reviewed in Hamilton, Port Colborne, Fort Erie, Leamington, Wallaceburg and Petrolia.
- The funding squeeze is forcing hospitals to centralize core hospital services across large geographic regions, moving them out of local community hospitals. Patients will have to travel from one hospital to another across their regions to access services. The provincial government has not made clear how far patients will be required to travel for hospital care.
- There are no clear plans and funding to offset increased municipal costs for ambulance, paramedic, fire and police services that will be required if the local Emergency Departments are closed or converted into clinics. Ambulance offload delays are a major problem in many larger hospitals already. There are concerns that the larger hospitals cannot take the influx of patients that would result from the movement of services out of local hospitals.
- Planning for infrastructure is misaligned with service planning. In Ajax – Pickering, a brand new mental health suite of 9 beds was just completed in time for all the mental health beds to be moved out of town to Scarborough. In Port Colborne, the government announced funding to expand and renovate the Emergency Department less than one year ago and now the Niagara Health System plans to close it down.
- Hospital deficits are worsened by staffing shortages and inadequate long term care (at home and in facilities) which are provincial government policy.
- Hospitals have reportedly been asked to sign « communication protocols » with the government-appointed LHINs, dictating what information can be released to the public and when.
- There has been major public outcry. Six thousand people have protested in Fort Erie and Port Colborne. Municipal Councils are passing motions for democratically-elected hospital boards, dissolution of amalgamated hospitals and provincial funding support to offset cuts. Editorials in community newspapers across the province have decried the lack of clear planning and cuts to services. Tens of thousands have signed petitions to save local hospital services.
- Ontario's hospitals have already been restructured for more than 15 years. Current underfunding is forcing deep cuts to patient services.

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