

Key message & quick analysis of Ford government economic statement just released

Ontario's government released its economic statement today. Overall, they are providing \$3.3 billion for health care, another \$3.7 billion in supports for people and businesses, and \$10 billion for other deferrals and tax "relief".

Health Coalition key message: *The overall funding announcement for health care of \$3.3 billion amounts to a funding increase of about 5 percent. This is approximately what is needed to just to meet population growth, aging, inflation and utilization at not much more than current levels. Please note: that total includes the \$1 billion COVID-19 contingency fund that the government announced today.*

Within the particular health subsectors (see below) the numbers need to be put into the context. Ontario is far behind due to years of austerity budgets, downsizing of public hospitals beyond all reason, and rationing of long-term care to levels far less than population need. We have a long way to go just to catch up. It is not unreasonable to demand that we catch up. Ontario funds health care at among the very the lowest rates of any province in Canada and we are at the bottom of the country in hospital funding.

We are hoping that the ramp up of testing and tracking happens quickly, people are waiting for tests and test results. We are supporting the unions' and health care workers' advocacy for immediate and urgent ramp up of N95 masks and other personal protective equipment. The hospitals are pushing for more Critical Care beds to take the expected influx of patients, and for ventilators and other equipment. We also know that there is already a staffing crisis in long-term care and the staff are working miracles to care for residents while families cannot go and visit.

We are echoing the important call on everyone to please take this seriously and stay home. I know the numbers of confirmed cases right now do not look large now and people do not see the reality of the threat, but it is real. More than 10,000 people are waiting for test results in our province right now. Only those with serious symptoms are being tested.

We are also calling on all our health care leaders to protect the principles of public medicare and ensure that capacity is build as quickly as possible in the public interest, under public governance and operated as non-profit services. This is not the time to take advantage and privatize.

We have inserted some analysis under each of the key budget items in health care that were announced today.

Here are some of the details the Ford government provided and our quick analysis:

\$1 billion contingency fund for COVID-19 this is included in the overall 5 percent health funding increase.

\$935 million for the hospital sector, including \$594 million for current capacity issues, as well as \$341 million for an additional 1,000 acute care and 500 critical care beds and additional assessment centres in response to COVID-19

Health Coalition analysis: The total of \$935 million is very close to the amount that the Ontario Hospital Association asked for in December to maintain existing service levels prior to COVID-19 and begin to address current capacity issues prior to COVID-19. We called for slightly more, again to address existing needs prior to COVID-19. To ramp up, all the supplies, staff and so on need to be in place. With the contingency funds that have been announced, there could be funding available to expand capacity. It is impossible to assess what will be enough in these changing circumstances.

Increasing public health funding by \$160 million to support COVID-19 monitoring, surveillance, and laboratory and home testing, while also investing in virtual care and Telehealth Ontario.

Health Coalition analysis: this finally wipes out last year's public health cuts and increases their budgets.

\$243 million for surge capacity in the long-term care sector, as well as funding for 24/7 screening, more staffing to support infection control, and supplies and equipment to help tackle the COVID-19 outbreak.

Health Coalition analysis: this will help to broaden capacity but there are 36,000 people on the wait list so it cannot address that. It does not address existing staffing shortages and improving levels of care to 4 hours average per resident per day as all of the family, resident, public interest, union and other advocates have been calling for.

\$75 million to supply personal protective equipment and critical medical supplies to front-line staff to tackle COVID-19.

Health Coalition analysis: We are behind and 55 million N95 masks in stockpiles expired rather than being rotated through and replaced to keep the supplies up to date. Later, when conditions improve, there needs to be accountability for this. In the meantime, urgently, staff and their unions are reporting that they are being told to work without proper protective equipment. We support their advocacy to address this as a priority. In addition, ventilators and other supplies are needed. This funding is encouraging but the supplies are needed now.

Overall: at a 5 percent increase including the COVID-19 contingency of \$1 billion, this is not enough to address what is needed and will likely be needed.