

March 5, 2015**Attn: Assignment Editor****For Immediate Release**

Pregnant Women, Mothers, Midwives and Community Members Issue Plea to Save Birthing Services

(Toronto) A group of pregnant women, mothers, midwives and community members traveled to Queen's Park today to raise the alarm about the proposed closure of birthing, maternity and maternal-newborn care at the Leamington Hospital. The closure would mean that women would have to travel to Windsor, more than an hour away, to deliver their babies at the nearest hospital with an OB unit.

According to Sandra Dick, an expectant mother, "Our rural community's access to safe birthing is in jeopardy. We deserve to keep our obstetrics services just as those in urban centres do. Our expecting mothers should not be put in the frightening position of driving more than an hour while anxious and in pain, and our babies' lives should not be put at this unnecessary risk."

A group of midwives, doctors, nurses and health professionals in Leamington submitted a proposal to the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care last summer that would protect local birthing and pre- and post-natal care while enhancing an integrated team-based approach. They gave this pro-active proposal to the Ministry four months before the plans to close the birthing unit at Leamington Hospital were announced. The community is still hoping for a positive response from the Ministry. According to Andrea Cassidy, a midwife with the Midwifery Collective of Essex County, "We have a proposal developed by Leamington's Obstetrical team that was informed by national research and best practice standards that would work, not only in our community but could be reproduced across the province in small and rural hospitals. We are asking the Ministry to consider this locally developed solution."

According to Jacqui Galy, a concerned local resident and business owner, "The fact that closing the Obstetrics unit is even being considered just shows one of the many ways in which rural women are being marginalized and not given the same access to care as urban women. Easily accessible health care services are vital for the growth of our community, from a health, safety and economic perspective. The future of our community depends on this."

Noting that this Saturday is International Women's Day, the Ontario Health Coalition warned that it appears that birthing and other women's health services are being systematically closed or cut, particularly in rural and smaller towns, but also in medium-sized cities. "Has the Ontario government made a policy decision behind-the-scenes to close birthing and women's health services in small and even medium-sized towns everywhere?", asked Natalie Mehra, executive director of the Ontario Health Coalition. "The public has never been consulted and nor has the Legislature. If they were it would be obvious that the overwhelming majority of Ontarians see birthing as a vital service, and oppose slashing it. We are appealing to all the MPPs – these cuts must be stopped."

Later today, the group will be meeting with local MPPs and with staff in the Ministry of Health, in hopes of communicating their deep concern about the cuts. The group is hopeful that the innovative proposal developed by Leamington's entire obstetrical team will serve as a viable option to save local birthing services, not only in Leamington, but across the province where birthing and other women's health services have been under threat.