

Ontario Health Coalition

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**Attn: Assignment Editor
For Immediate Release**

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Democratic Board, Protection of Emergency & Patient Services, and Answers to Key Questions A “Must”: Health Coalition on Niagara Hospital Consolidation Proposal

The Ontario and Niagara Health Coalitions will be consulting with our members across Niagara in developing our response to government-appointed hospital supervisor Kevin Smith’s recommendation to close five hospital sites and consolidate services into one site for south Niagara.

We are pleased that Kevin Smith has recognized the need to seriously address the lack of public confidence in the NHS leadership, the issues regarding staff morale, and the need for a patient transportation system, particularly for those with chronic illness, low income, and mental health issues.

However, the coalition raised red flags about several elements of Smith’s recommendations, including:

- With these recommendations, Kevin Smith and the McGuinty government are continuing their trend of trying to wipe out democratically elected hospital boards and replace them with appointed boards. Under the guise of “skills-based boards” – a red-herring – they are setting up a system in which CEOs can easily dominate the boards and have less accountability to communities. This system of undemocratic unaccountable boards has aided the growth of tiers of administration while enabling cuts to patient services. Until the NHS was created, each Niagara community with a hospital had an elected board that answered to the community. In fact, Ontario has, until recent years, a long history of elected boards and the government has never gone to the legislature for approval to wipe out democracy in this way.
- In addition, Kevin Smith recommends that the new hospital, which would result in the closure of four hospitals in south Niagara and one in Niagara-On-the-Lake, be under the governance of the NHS with a new appointed board. From our public consultations to date, we have heard loudly and clearly that the NHS is not supported by the public in those communities.
- We have sought clarification as to whether the new South Niagara hospital will have an emergency department in addition to the free-standing urgent care centre that is proposed. This must be clarified. The proposal from Kevin Smith is to close down two emergency departments in Welland and Niagara Falls. Both of these emergency departments are extremely busy. In addition, the two urgent care centres in Port Colborne and Fort Erie would be closed to be replaced with one freestanding urgent care centre (location not yet determined). Questions regarding access to emergency and urgent care services need to be answered.
- It appears that the plan is to close the complex continuing care beds and clinics in the Niagara-On-the-Lake site. In addition, the complex continuing care beds in Port Colborne and Fort Erie would be closed. Given how few beds the new St. Catharines hospital will contain, we are concerned about a bed shortage, particularly for patients who require complex longer-term care. There are already too few long-term care beds in the region and care levels are insufficient in long-term care homes to provide care for high-needs and complex patients that continue to be downloaded into long term care.
- It also appears that critical care would be reduced from three sites to two with the proposed closure of Welland and GNGH. We need clarification as to how patient access would be preserved in this model.
- In addition, Kevin Smith was supposed to review the “Hospital Improvement Plan” (HIP). There is no mention of the review of the HIP in his interim report, a review that the public has been waiting for. We are seeking information as to what has happened with this review.

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