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Ontario Budget: Health Coalition is watching for sufficient health funding, strings attached in for-profit LTC & a stop to the Ford government's privatization of health care

Toronto – The Health Coalition said today that the funding numbers for health care in the budget are going to look huge of course, due to the pandemic, but the Coalition will be watching to make sure that funding is indeed enough. Equally important to the amount of funding, are strings attached to require improvements in long-term care, and a stop to the Ford government's attempts to use new public funding to privatize health care services, as follows:

- **Hospitals** – on Monday the government announced partial funding for hospital deficits and lost revenues. Across Ontario, our public hospitals have shown extraordinary leadership and heroic fortitude throughout the pandemic, opening testing (assessment) centres, ramping up unprecedented lab testing capacity, sending in emergency teams for LTC outbreaks and vaccination teams for LTC and seniors in the community, providing critical care for COVID-19 patients, clearing surgical and diagnostic backlogs and much more. They need their lost revenues and deficits covered, without caveats. The Health Coalition is watching for ample funding going forward, post-pandemic, to clear backlogs and to open new public hospital capacity to ensure that the severe overcrowding and pressure to move out elderly patients that was the norm prior to the pandemic is never again tolerated. The for-profit privatization of cataract surgeries and other public hospital services by the Ford government is unacceptable and will face a major fight-back, vowed the Health Coalition today.
- **Long-Term Care** – On December 17 the Ford government revealed its LTC plan including an unconscionable delay in getting LTC care levels up to safety. The first 15-minute increase in care levels is not scheduled until April 2022, and the ramp up to 4-hours of care is not scheduled for at least 4-years. Not only have we lost more than 15-minutes of care per day per resident with the loss of staff in the pandemic, but the slow timeline means that most of the elderly living in long-term care will never live to see sufficient care. The only explanation for the delay is a political decision not to spend the money on increasing care. At the same time, the for-profit LTC homes have been paying out tens of millions of dollars in dividends (profits) throughout the pandemic, even as residents died of dehydration, isolation, and ghastly inadequacies in care.

Ontarians are horrified at what has happened and continues to happen in our long-term care homes, noted the Coalition. They want to see proper care levels and real accountability as top priorities. The many LTC corporations and home operators that have had the worst records through the pandemic have not been required to staff up, have not had the comprehensive annual surprise inspections reinstated, have not been held accountable in any meaningful way for providing substandard care. There can no longer be long-term care funding enhancements without strings attached to improve care levels – which means increased staffing – and the provision of safe, secure homes for the

residents. Any funding must be attached to meaningful accountability. The for-profit privatization of thousands of new and rebuilt beds to those same for-profit LTC corporations, paid by the public's money, under the Ford government's current plans will also be met with massive protest, the Health Coalition promised.

- Public Health – the 2019 cuts to and planned closure of local public health units and their governance must finally be fully reversed. The Coalition called for the Ford government to stop giving contracts to for-profit pharmacies, labs and other companies with well-connected lobbyists seeking to privatize vital public health care functions.
- Home Care-- Home care is also majority privatized in Ontario with wages and working conditions that are so poor that companies routinely cannot provide enough staff to actually show up to provide the home care that clients are assessed as needing, leaving clients routinely with no care and no notice. Again, the increase in home care funding that was already announced in the fall and is expected to be reannounced in today's budget must go to improving care, including improving their conditions to attract and retain staff, and not on profit-taking.

Briefing Note on Health Care Privatization Under the Pandemic:

Long-term care: While the Premier was careful to hold press conferences announcing only the new public and non-profit LTC beds in the summer, quietly behind the scenes, his government has been in the process of giving thousands of LTC beds to for-profit LTC chains in of 30-year licenses for new homes and rebuilds that the public will be paying for. In fact, the very worst of the for-profit LTC chains during the pandemic are in the process of being awarded new 30-year licenses and expansions. This is just one example of how the billions of dollars in funding announced in today's budget are being privatized unless the Ford government is forced to change course, the Coalition warned today.

Home Care Privatization: Also under cover of the pandemic, the Coalition reports, the Ford government has passed a new law enabling them to privatize the last remaining public parts of home care, and offload the oversight of home care to the same (majority) for-profit chains and companies that have failed to provide decent care for years.

Hospital Privatization: In February, the Ford government put out a call for private for-profit clinics to apply for funding to take over cataract surgeries from public hospitals, even though existing private clinics are known for extra-billing patients in violation of the Canada Health Act, and private cataract surgeries cost more. Well-connected lobbyists who have served in Conservative governments registered to lobby for for-profit cataract clinics to get these contracts.

Labs & Testing: Instead of prioritizing ramp up of labs and testing in public hospitals and public health units, the Ford government has given contracts to private lab companies and giant for-profit pharmacy chains. The expansion of Shopper's Drug Mart and others into our health care system raises red flags, the Health Coalition warned, and we will ensure that any attempts to undermine public non-profit care will meet with stiff resistance.