

Ontario Health Coalition

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Attn: Assignment Editor

For Immediate Release

Protest at Liberal Cabinet Minister Deb Matthews' Office to Stop Closure of Birthing Services, Cuts to Smaller Community Hospitals

London – More than 60 women, children, families and activists joined forces to protest the proposed closure of birthing and other obstetrical services at Leamington's hospital outside MPP Deb Matthews' office on Saturday in London, Ontario. A large group, including pregnant women, travelled from Leamington to London to bring their message to the Senior Cabinet Minister. They were joined by concerned citizens from Oxford County, Stratford, St. Marys, and Seaforth where services including labs, acute care beds and other services are being slashed. Nurses and activists from London joined the protest in solidarity, noting that London's hospital is running at more than 100% capacity often and, after suffering major cuts here, there is no room for regional patients whose local services have been axed. The same is true for Windsor's hospital, where Leamington's expectant mothers would be forced to travel, more than an hour's drive, if their local services are cut.

Leamington is the latest in a string of smaller communities in Ontario where birthing services have been cut or threatened. Renfrew, Niagara, and other communities have seen their local birthing services cut in recent years.

"If birthing is not a serious enough service for the government to keep in local towns, then everything is at risk, from surgeries to emergency departments," warned Health Coalition executive director Natalie Mehra. "This is part of a vicious cycle of cuts, at the end of which they tell the local community that their hospital is no longer viable and try to turn it into a clinic."

Gayle Beattie from St. Marys, just north of London, reported major cuts to acute care beds and services. The local hospital lost its birthing more than a decade ago and the community fought off an attempt to close their Emergency Department at night a few years ago. But the cuts have continued, and most recently one-third of all remaining acute care beds were closed. Major cuts have occurred in towns like Seaforth, Clinton and even Stratford, she noted.

Residents from Tillsonburg and Ingersoll reported similar erosion to the scope of services in their local community hospitals.

Sandra Dick, who is pregnant and expecting her baby in April, told the assembled crowd that families in her situation should not be put in the frightening position of having to drive more than an hour to the nearest hospital to give birth while in pain and anxious.

Midwives, cheered on by the crowd holding signs that read, "Save OB Leamington" and "I was born in Leamington Hospital," reported that these cuts are not supported by the evidence, and the team of midwives, doctors, nurses and health professionals in Leamington have made a proposal that would protect local birthing and pre- and post-natal care while enhancing an integrated team-based approach. The Ministry of Health has never responded to the proposal.

Deb Matthews has been appointed by Premier Kathleen Wynne to a new Senior Cabinet position of President of the Treasury Board, responsible for forcing through the government's planned cuts to public services including hospitals. The Leamington group, working with local constituents of Deb Matthews asked the Senior Cabinet Minister for a meeting to discuss these issues before the protest but received a response that she is too busy to meet. The group will bring their concerns to the Ontario Legislature next week.

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