

Minister's Panel on Rural and Northern Health Announced In Response to Protests on Hospital Cuts

Health Coalition Issues "Action Call" to all Members to Contact Their MPPs to Insist on a Moratorium on Hospital Cuts in Small and Rural Hospitals Pending the Completion of the Panel's Work; Task Force Must Consult with Public

On April 29, more than 3,000 people travelled by bus, car pool and public transit to the front lawn of Queen's Park to join our protest demanding that McGuinty stop the cuts and closures of local hospitals across Ontario. Local municipal councils joined in and the mayors of a number of communities announced an alliance to protect their hospitals. Small and rural communities were particularly visible with people carrying messages from Wallaceburg, Fort Erie, Port Colborne, Welland, Niagara Falls, Strathroy, Petrolia, Burk's Falls, Kincardine, Quinte West, Picton and other towns. Larger communities also facing cuts such as Hamilton, Guelph, Cambridge and Toronto were also well represented.

As a result, the McGuinty government announced a Task Force on Rural and Northern Health Care. After many delays, a Minister's Panel was finally named in mid-July. The mandate of the Panel is at best fuzzy and makes no mention of the devastating hospital cuts and closures that were its genesis. To date, the Ministry has not provided us with any information on the Panel's process and there is no assurance of a public process of consultation. According to the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care:

"The panel, to be chaired by Kirkland and District Hospital CEO, Hal Fjeldsted, will provide recommendations to the government on how to better coordinate the delivery of health care services in Ontario's rural and northern areas.

The panel's members represent a broad range of stakeholders and health care professionals who will draw on their experiences working in rural and northern areas of Ontario.

The panel will highlight current programs and services targeting northern and rural communities, identify rural and northern Ontario's unique health care challenges and recommend steps the government can take to improve access to health care in rural and northern Ontario using existing resources.

The panel will provide a report and recommendations to the government this winter."

A full list of the panelists is at:
<http://news.ontario.ca/mohltc/en/2009/07/rural-and-northern-health-panel-takes-shape.html>

In the meantime:

- All surgeries in Fort Erie have been cut and the beds closed. The ER in Port Colborne has been closed. The Niagara Health System restructuring and cuts are moving forward.
- The Urgent Care Centre in Burk's Falls has been closed with little warning and all beds are slated to close by December.
- Closures of hospital beds, services and ERs in Wallaceburg, Petrolia, Quinte West, Picton, St. Joseph Island and other communities are on hold for now.
- The Central East LHIN has revealed a plan to cut and centralize hospital services across the entire LHIN.
- Major cuts in large and small hospitals across the province have gone ahead in some areas and appear to be stalled in others.

URGENT: Call to Action on Hospital Cuts

Approximately 80% of Ontario's hospitals have been in deficit this year. Many have cut staff, programs and services to meet government rules that require that they eliminate their deficits. Small hospitals amalgamated to larger hospitals during the Harris round of restructuring in the mid-1990s have been particularly threatened with major bed closures, ER closures, and downgrading to clinic status. Across Ontario, plans are underway to centralize hospital services into fewer sites, reducing the scope of services provided in local hospitals and forcing patients to travel far out of town to get care.

The results of the cuts and closures include:

- increased wait times in the remaining ERs
- significant problems with hospital-borne infections in overcrowded hospitals
- more user fees as laboratories, physiotherapy and other clinics are privatized
- patients forced to travel great distances for care
- patients forced to long term care homes far away from their families and support systems
- privatization of formerly non-profit public services

Please call your local MPP as soon as possible:
for a list, go to <http://www.ontla.on.ca/web/home.do>

Ask your local MPP to:

1. Stop the hospital cuts
2. If you live in a small, rural or northern community, ask your MPP to insist on a moratorium on cuts and closures of hospital services pending the results of the Minister's Panel on Rural and Northern Care.
3. Tell your MPP that there must be public hearings on the record regarding this government's hospital restructuring plans.

Key Facts:

- Ontario funds our hospitals less than virtually all other provinces in Canada.
- This year, this shortfall has meant \$1.6 billion less in hospital funding than other provinces.
- We already have less hospital beds, less staff, and less funding than the rest of the country.
- It is inhumane to force patients to travel far from their home communities for care.
- Paramedics across Ontario have expressed grave concerns about patient safety as a result of the proposed cuts (see the OHC's recently-released report based on a consultation with more than 50 paramedics across Ontario: "Putting Patients At Risk" at www.ontariohealthcoalition.ca)
- If you have personal examples of worsened access to care (eg. Your local pain clinic closed and now you have to travel to Toronto), new user fees (eg. your hospital outpatient lab is closed and now you are paying for blood tests at a private lab, or paying for private physiotherapy), tell your MPP.

