



February 13, 2023

Dear Ontario Party Leaders:

Re: Urgent need to improve access to primary care in Ontario

As Ontario, the federal government and other provinces and territories reach agreement on transformational health system improvements, the Ontario Association of Councils on Aging (OACA) Board of Directors requests the urgent implementation of systemic improvements that ensure the adequacy of health human resources, prioritizing increased access to primary care across Ontario.

The OACA, which reflects the perspective of thousands of older adults across the province, recognizes the complexity of the interrelated components of a publicly funded and administered health care system in our federation. The Association urges immediate attention to prompt access to primary care, which is the foundation and gateway to an effective and sustainable broader health care system that includes key components such as home and community care, mental health, acute and long-term care.

The OACA's perspective on primary care can be summarized under the following three points:

1. Primary care in Ontario is in crisis, and is more critical in rural areas and disproportionately impacts older adults:

- A recent study by a network of university-based researchers revealed that 2.2 million or 14.7 % of Ontarians did not have access to a regular primary care provider as of March 2022 (an increase of 24% from March of 2020)
- In rural areas, the percentage of Ontarians without access to a regular primary care provider is higher. It is estimated to be 20 percent and projected to increase to 25 to 30 %, in large part due to anticipated physician retirements in rural communities. For example, in Grey and Bruce Counties, 30,000 permanent residents do not have a regular primary care provider, and of the 115,000 rostered patients, 14% have a family physician who is over the age of 60, and potentially approaching retirement.
- As the population ages, older adults' need for health care typically increases as does the need for more complex health supports. Also, many older adults are outliving their primary care providers who are retiring or burnt out and not being replaced in sufficient numbers.

Ontario Association of Councils on Aging (OACA)
c/o Toronto Council on Aging, 140 Merton St. Toronto, Ontario M4T 2C5
<https://www.ontariocouncilsonaging.ca> info@ontariocouncilsonaging.ca

2. The primary care crisis negatively impacts the health of the individual directly and adds a workload burden and unnecessary cost to the broader health care system:

- Patients who don't get timely access to a primary care provider, may unnecessarily seek care at an already overburdened hospital emergency department, some of which have already reduced their hours or closed at times, particularly in some rural areas
- Treatment from various physicians in an emergency department for immediate symptoms negates continuity and follow-up for many older adults with chronic conditions, and may pose problems with prescribed medications and require multiple visits
- Delays in getting required primary care may result in patients' illnesses advancing and thus requiring critical care and/or hospitalization and/or admission to long-term care, all of which could have been prevented by timely access and continuity of primary care.

3. Systemic and integrated measures must be urgently implemented to address the crisis, including:

- Increasing available health human resources, through measures such as increasing opportunities for family medicine and related training at Ontario universities that is commensurate to the growing needs of the population
- Streamlining processes for recognizing health care professions trained abroad (particularly Canadians who have trained abroad and are interested in practicing in Canada) or currently practicing elsewhere in Canada
- Continuing to increase the number of nurse practitioners
- Increasing the options of practicing in interprofessional health teams settings (e.g., a family health team, family health organizations, nurse practitioner led teams, community health centres)
- Incentivizing primary care providers to assume family practices, with particular incentives to take on patients with chronic conditions, and patients in rural areas.

There is a current opportunity for the federal, provincial, and territorial governments to agree on transformational health care improvements, which must include concerted and targeted measures to strengthen the foundation of the health care system for the benefit of each individual and the broader system – access to timely primary care.

To ensure these desired outcomes, there must be regular monitoring to ensure value for money through effective tracking of indicators that assure patients that the system is effective in meeting individual health needs. Anything less will be unacceptable! We hope we have your commitment.



Lilian Wells, President
Ontario Association of Councils on Aging

cc: Ministers of Health and of Seniors and Accessibility, AMO