

Health Minister Christine Elliott visits HHCC following reform announcement



By Mike Baker

After the provincial government last week announced sweeping changes to Ontario's health care system, Headwaters Health Care Centre (HHCC) President and CAO Stacey Daub is remaining optimistic the looming reform could have a positive impact on services in Dufferin County.

Last Tuesday (Feb. 26), Christine Elliott, Deputy Premier and Minister of Health and Long-Term Care, revealed the provincial government had a plan to "fix and strengthen" the public health care system. She revealed services would now operate under a single health agency called Ontario Health, with between 30 and 50 local Ontario Health Teams spread across the province.

The move will, essentially, eliminate a variety of singular provincial entities, such as Cancer Care Ontario, Ontario Mental Health Foundation, Trillium Gift of Life Network and 14 different Local Health Integration Networks (LHINs), merging as one under the Ontario Health umbrella.

Speaking to CBC last week, Ms. Elliott noted the decision to reform Ontario's health care sector was not made to cut costs, instead indicating it's a much needed change to improve the standard of care for patients.

"This is a transformational change and is being done to centre care around patients, families and caregivers. That's not happening right now," Ms. Elliott said. "We want to truly integrate and connect care so patients have a seamless care experience throughout their journey and throughout their lives."

She added, "As patient ombudsman and Ontario's Minister of Health, I've had the opportunity to hear from thousands of patients and families and this is what they want. This is what we need in health care right now and we're ready to move forward with this transformation."

In a release to media, local MPP Sylvia Jones expressed her support for the proposed changes.

"Ontario's new plan for health care will better organize our hard working health care providers, including doctors and nurses, to work as one connected and coordinated team focused on patients' specific local needs," Ms. Jones said.

While work to overhaul the provincial health care system will begin in the spring, Minister Elliott indicated it would take years to implement.

"This is a transformation that is going to take some time, it will not happen overnight," Ms. Elliott said.

The Minister was in Orangeville on Friday as she, along with local Ms. Jones, toured our local hospital and sat down with front line staff to learn more about how care is currently delivered at the facility. Ms. Daub noted it was "a great visit".

"I believe they wanted to come out and visit a community where there are good examples in place that the Minister could learn from, where she could get some advice on how to make this move successful and find out what teams need locally to succeed," Ms. Daub told the Citizen.

She added, "We have a lot of things that demonstrate success on the ground here. We have fantastic partnerships already with various Dufferin-area family health teams, with our mental health partners, with Dufferin EMS. The fact we all work together as a partnership is what makes us so successful."

While not confirming whether or not Minister Elliott had suggested Dufferin County would be a suitable home for a local Ontario Health Team, Ms. Daub expressed her belief the community would be a great fit.

"I really feel that Dufferin and the surrounding area is really quite well suited to advance the type of integration the provincial government is looking for," Ms. Daub said. "There is an expression of interest going to be put out for communities to respond to, and (Minister Elliott) indicated she thought Dufferin was a good example of a place that might put in an expression of interest to lead one of these new teams."

Should Dufferin County be successful in any eventual bid, it would mean, according to Minister Elliott, that people within the community would be the decision makers when it comes to deciding what services and programs to fund locally.

"The current structure is not working for the people of Ontario. We've got to change that," Minister Elliott said. "It will be up to the local Ontario Health Care teams to decide what resources are needed for their area. They will be provided a fiscal allocation every year and will have freedom (to spend it on what they deem necessary and appropriate)."

Any money the government saves in eliminating excess bureaucracy, Minister Elliott says, will be redirected to hiring more front-line workers. A big focus of the plan, she added, was to eliminate the need for patients to be re-admitted to hospital after a stay by improving the home care process. That, in turn, should help to open up much needed beds across Ontario's hospitals.

"Right now we have over 1,000 patients receiving care in hallways or storage rooms. We are looking to lower those numbers to allow people to, once they leave hospital, receive care they need at home, be well and not be readmitted," Ms. Elliott said.

Attempts to consolidate provincial health care services has been made in B.C., Alberta and Nova Scotia to varying levels of success. Minister Elliott noted she had the utmost confidence in this "made-in-Ontario" plan.

Dufferin County Warden Darren White expressed his excitement at the announcement and the possibility of the region securing a local Ontario Health Team.

"We are very interested to explore opportunities to work with our community partners to enhance health care services for all residents," Mr. White said. "Finding more ways to collaborate and integrate services that address the entire spectrum of health care and support services for our senior population is a high priority for Dufferin County Council. We have a strong record of building community partnerships and are committed to further strengthening relationships that will help create local solutions to health care challenges."

Ms. Daub is treating everything with a similar sense of optimism, noting, if the provincial government meets its goals, the result should be a "more coordinated and more locally tailored" health care service.

"Right now, the health service is quite siloed. Money comes into different places and areas, from different places and areas, which it

makes it hard to think about things collaboratively," Ms. Daub said. "If things work out the way Minister Elliott and the government wants them to, it would allow the community to have more flexibility and provide the opportunity to locally tailor our services."

For more information on the provincial government's plan for health services in Ontario, visit www.health.gov.on.ca.