

AFHTO Pre-Budget Recommendations for the 2020 Ontario Budget

Primary care is the foundation of people's health care: it supports them throughout their lifetime with care that is comprehensive, promotes health and wellbeing, and works to prevent, detect, treat and manage illnesses. Coordinated, integrated primary care keeps people out of hospital and can help solve hallway health care by preventing them from ending up there in the first place. Evidence shows that primary care is also associated with improved system quality, fairness, and efficiency, which helps reduce cost.

AFHTO is pleased to provide recommendations for addressing some of the challenges straining our health system. Together with government, we will build more coordinated, integrated and person-centered health care for the people of Ontario.

1. Increase Access to Interprofessional Team-Based Primary Care for Ontarians Who Need It

As the population ages, more people will spend more years living with multiple chronic conditions, significantly increasing strain on health services. Interprofessional primary care teams are integrated around patients and their caregivers to promote, maintain or improve health and wellbeing. While it is tempting to focus on bed capacity or flow rate through the hospital when addressing hallway health care, the most sustainable solution – and the one that provides the best care and quality of life for patients – is to keep people healthier so they don't need to go to the hospital in the first place. Improved access to integrated interprofessional care is the best way to achieve this.

How we get there:

Government should work with the sector to support the expansion of interprofessional team-based care. This can start with communities that do not have a team and expand to all Ontarians who need it. Allow for local level innovation but ensure that primary care providers are involved in the co-design as they know what would work best in their communities and for their patients. As Ontario Health Teams start rolling out, ensure comprehensive primary care is at the heart of the health system, so patients get care from the right provider at the right time and in the right place.

2. Invest in Clinical Leadership to Ensure Successful Roll-out of Ontario Health Teams

A team of leaders at the practice, organizational and community levels can drive change on the ground and across all practice models. Primary care providers know patients and their families best. They are the best resource government has for shifting the profession and the health system towards a shared vision and purpose. But this cannot be managed by one or two individuals alone. It is critical that they all be empowered to lead OHT development. Successfully building integrated care in OHTs, led by primary care, will require clinical leadership.

How we get there:

Primary care leaders have a strong willingness to play a central role in delivering more joined-up care. They are ready to help drive improvement in our health system. We call on the Ministry to support primary care leaders' participation in health system transformation by investing in and supporting clinical leadership.

3. Embed Mental Health and Addictions Support in Primary Care

How we get there:

Government should work with primary care and mental health care providers to ensure mental health and addictions investments are embedded in primary care. Mental health is the number one pain point in primary care. The Ministry should rapidly roll out the publicly funded structured psychotherapy program so more Ontarians have access to supports when they need them.

Ontario is on the verge of a mental health and addictions crisis. People across the province wait months for mental health and addiction services, and many end up in hospital emergency departments rather than getting the support they need in the community. We need to provide continuity of care and can't wait for the full roll-out of OHTs to achieve this. These resources need to be in the community where the person lives and receives comprehensive care, and not in an expensive acute care centre.

4. Help End Hallway Health Care by Embedding Home and Community Care Coordination with Primary Care

How we get there:

The function and associated resources of community care coordination should be transitioned to primary care. This will bring greater efficiency and patient-centredness to care. Care will be integrated, allowing for seamless transitions for patients. It will also allow for greater continuity of care, which will lead to better patient safety and prevent them from telling their story over and over again.

Effective care coordination reduces duplication, facilitates better access, contributes to better value by reducing costs and, above all, results in a better experience for patients. Care coordination and system navigation are key functions of primary care and should be foundational in the development of OHTs. Primary care is the most effective setting to facilitate seamless transitions and give patients a single point of contact or 'hub' in their health care journey.

5. Support Digital Health Options in Primary Care

How we get there:

We recommend government adopt a digital health strategy that is co-designed by providers and patients. Ensure it is not fragmented by sector but interoperable and accessible regardless of where patients may be receiving care. Provide billing codes to recognize that care delivered digitally is valued as much as an in-person visit and get closer to the vision of having one electronic health record that tells the full patient story.

The health community is already embracing innovations in digital, but progress is slow. Patients want convenient access to their health care team and to know their health information is all in one place, so stories don't have to be repeated over and over again. This cannot happen without modernizing our current model and thinking about how care is delivered – whether in person or virtually.

The Association of Family Health Teams of Ontario (AFHTO) is the advocate, network and resource centre for interprofessional comprehensive primary care teams. Our members collectively take care of over 3.5 million people in Ontario.

Please address questions to Kavita Mehta, CEO, at kavita.mehta@afhto.ca or 647-204-0212.