

OCC Policy Resolutions 2025 – Whitby Chamber of Commerce

D. Simplify Information Sharing to Improve Specialized Mental Health Care for People Experiencing Homelessness

Submitted by: The Greater Oshawa Chamber of Commerce. Co-sponsored by: Sault Ste-Marie Chamber of Commerce, Chamber of Commerce Brantford-Brant, Scugog Chamber of Commerce, Whitby Chamber of Commerce, and Guelph Chamber of Commerce

Issue

There is a lack of integration among care professionals when caring for the complex mental health needs of people experiencing homelessness and experiencing acute mental health crises, leading to a disproportionate number of hospital emergency department visits, and an increase in preventable overdoses and deaths. The ‘circle of care’ model put forward by the Information and Privacy Commissioner does address information sharing for several health information custodians, but it fails to include two of the most common service providers involved in the case management of individuals experiencing homelessness with complex mental health needs: law enforcement and social services.

Background

Healthcare providers and community service providers must be able to collaborate to meet the unique mental health needs of people experiencing homelessness²⁵² in order to ensure stronger socioeconomic opportunities and safeguard health system capacity. The misapplication and restrictive nature of current privacy laws prevent the necessary and timely collaboration of professionals when addressing the ongoing and complex mental health needs of those experiencing homelessness. One intention of the Personal Health Information Protection Act, 2004 (PHIPA) is to provide practitioners with the right information at the right time. Without access to the full scope of information from all providers involved in an individual’s case management, emergency healthcare providers and emergency responders are unable to assess and tend to an individual’s needs effectively and appropriately.

This results in inadequate care for people experiencing homelessness and mental health and/or addictions challenges, which can lead to the continuation of those complex challenges. It also directly creates missed opportunities to adequately and more quickly address some of the individuals’ acute needs, effectively short-circuiting any chance to stabilize the person in a more timely fashion.

With growing rates of homelessness and mental health and addictions challenges in communities across the province, municipalities and local businesses are unable to manage the associated business, economic, and health system costs and impacts. For example, individuals experiencing

homelessness make up a disproportionate share of Canadian emergency department visits in the absence of adequate and affordable housing and/or mental health supports. This puts additional and unnecessary strain on our hospitals, healthcare resources, and the community at large. The lack of specialized mental health care for people experiencing homelessness is evident through the inability of all service providers to integrate specific case knowledge in the care planning process and through a system that fails to provide accessible care environments for all demographics. This lack of specialized care is also evident in the suboptimal discharge planning provided by hospitals and the justice systems (e.g., access to affordable housing, mental health and addictions supports, etc.) and the high rates of readmission among people experiencing homelessness. The direct impact to businesses is that these barriers to care are directly correlated to a slowing down of many individuals' pathways to becoming re-housed/re-integrated, posing significant, ongoing pressures on local communities, the health care system, and the economy more broadly.

Recommendations

The Ontario Chamber of Commerce urges the Government of Ontario to:

1. Review relevant sections of the Personal Health Information Protection Act that prevent sharing of information among service providers involved in clinical case management of people experiencing homelessness, specifically, non-healthcare related sector service providers such as social service and emergency service providers.
2. Ensure a provincial funding commitment to specialized mental health care for people experiencing homelessness.
3. Create enhanced support mechanisms for people with mental health conditions for aftercare after being released from the hospital, so they can be monitored for a more extended period by the required mental health specialist and social service professional, in partnership with the ACT team.

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Sunset Date: April 29, 2026

H. Supporting Healthcare Infrastructure in Ontario

Submitted by: Whitby Chamber of Commerce

Issue

To support Durham Region's rapidly growing community and increasing healthcare demands, Lakeridge Health and many stakeholders established a Master Plan which includes the building of a Hospital and Trauma Centre in Whitby. Currently, those efforts hang on the approval for the 2-million-dollar planning grant, from the Ontario Government. The Whitby Chamber of Commerce brings forth a resolution in support of the Lakeridge Health planning grant.

Background

The development of a new hospital in Durham Region is a key component of Lakeridge Health's Master Plan, which provides a roadmap for the future of health-care delivery in Durham Region, which aims to provide inpatient bed growth of almost 1,000 beds to meet projected demand over the next 25 years.

In January 2022, Lakeridge Health's Board of Trustees accepted the Expert Panel's recommendation of the site in Whitby as the preferred location for a proposed future hospital. The Panel was made up of a diverse group of professionals who bring many years of leadership experience and expertise in health care and real estate development to this site selection process.²⁶⁷

The preferred site is located on 50 acres of land south of Highway 407, west of Highway 412, east of Lake Ridge Road and north of Highway 7/Winchester Road (owned by the Province). The location is easily accessible given its proximity to existing major highways and roadways, as well as planned public transit projects. Its location in central Durham Region will help to efficiently serve residents across the region.

The panelists also had knowledge of the Region, grounding their final recommendations on fact and experience. The process of selecting the hospital site was independent, transparent, and understandably expensive.

Healthcare Demands in Durham

There is a dire and growing need for increased and improved Health services in Durham. In 2023, it was estimated that 44 thousand Durham residents have no family physician, this number rose by 11 thousand since 2021. With a lack of healthcare workers and sufficient resources, the Region's residents are forced to find medical services in neighboring Regions and are often transported to hospitals outside Durham; this adds undue loan on the Provincial healthcare system, increasing costs and pressures on the system that could be avoided by the Regional Hospital. The significant population growth projected for Durham Region will only add greater pressure on the current services available. According to Statistics Canada, the population of

Durham Region grew by 6.3% between 2016 and 2021, which is higher than the national average growth rate of 5.3%. Moreover, Durham Region is projected to have a population of over 900,000 by 2041, which represents an increase of almost 30% from its current population.

To illustrate the rapid changes, Durham Workforce Authority's 2023 Data Walk shows that between 2016 and 2021 (a mere five years) our region:

- Experienced 7.91% population growth;
- Is home to 4.9% of Ontario's residents; and
- Saw the percentage of residents who are 65 year or older increase 19.71%.²⁶⁸

In parallel to the increasing demand, Durham current hospital facilities are aging; according to Lakeridge Health, the average age of its facilities is 50 years, which is well above the recommended lifespan of most hospital buildings.

Despite being the second largest municipality in Ontario, Durham Region still has no trauma centre within our boundaries. This means that that we must frequently continue to engage the services of Ornge to evacuate critically-injured or endangered patients, costing both valuable treatment time and vastly more than local ground ambulance service. The new hospital is also planned to provide acute care, which are not currently available in Durham Region.

Neighbouring the Greater Toronto Area, Durham Region's success will have a direct impact on the distribution of available resources and services in the GTA, which is facing its own strain on healthcare services.

Economic Impact and Timing

A new hospital is crucial for the success of our local businesses and organizations. By providing high quality healthcare services locally, we can ensure a healthier and more productive workforce, which in turn will drive economic growth and prosperity. Additionally, a new hospital will attract and retain new businesses, investors, and employees, ultimately contributing to the long-term sustainability and success of our community. Currently, our Chambers advocacy surveys indicate that hiring skilled labour is a significant challenge to our local businesses, without strong infrastructure and community, Durham region will continue to lose skilled talent to neighbouring regions that offer better support and services.

The hospital will also undoubtedly fuel local and support local spin off industries, like sports and fitness, medicine, therapeutics, physio, private labs, and nurse practitioner services.

It could be as much as 10 years before this new hospital is open and the rate of growth across the entire region is too fast to continue to delay this process. Regional reports indicate that the Durham population is expected to rise from 723,200 in 2021 to 1.3 million by 2051, almost doubling, and becoming a more important economic hub in southern Ontario.

Ontario's success relies on the strength and sustainability of its regions, particularly along the Greater Horseshoe area. If one of the links is weak, it adds pressure to the rest, threatening the health and growth of the Ontario economy.

Strengthening our healthcare infrastructure in Durham gives Ontario another continued powerhouse of economic success. Recommendation The Ontario Chamber of Commerce urges the Government of Ontario to:

1. Reduce the lengthy timelines and process for hospital infrastructure renewal projects, including access to planning grants, to facilitate the development of modernized and new hospital builds that can better meet the acute care needs of Ontarians.

Effective Date: April 27, 2024

Sunset Date: April 27, 2027

²⁶⁷ Site Selection Process for a Proposed New Hospital - Lakeridge Health

²⁶⁸ Data Walk – December 2023 - https://durhamworkforceauthority.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Data-WalkDecember-2023_Posters_FINAL-Corrected-Posters-Dec-6-2023.pdf Durham Community Foundation – Vital Signs –Health - 2023 - <https://durhamcommunityfoundation.ca/dcfwp/wpcontent/uploads/2023/11/VitalSigns-Report-11-24-23.pdf>

J. Improving Access to Ontario Government Funding Programs Through a Centralized Portal

Submitted by: Belleville Chamber of Commerce. Co-sponsored by: Greater Barrie Chamber of Commerce, Orillia & District Chamber of Commerce, Brockville and District Chamber of Commerce, Chatham-Kent Chamber of Commerce, The Greater Oshawa Chamber of Commerce, Peterborough and the Kawarthas Chamber of Commerce, and Whitby Chamber of Commerce

Issue

Ontario needs to create a centralized portal to support access to funding programs. Ontario's funding processes are intended to support organizations across various sectors, including tourism, business development, and non-profit initiatives. However, stakeholders have expressed concerns about the system's complexity and lack of user-friendliness, which hinder access to available funding.

Background

The federal government's Grants and funding portal, consolidates access to all funding programs into a single, user-friendly platform. This centralized system streamlines access to program information, reduces administrative complexity, and allows applicants to track the progress of their submissions.

In 2024, Stéphane Sarrazin, Parliamentary Assistant to Associate Minister Nina Tangri, acknowledged that the grant program was struggling to attract applications, prompting an extension of the application deadline. When asked why this was occurring, stakeholders cited complex eligibility criteria and extensive reporting requirements as significant barriers for applicants. At their suggestion, this request to simplify the process has been prepared.

Ontario's funding system could benefit from adopting similar best practices to enhance accessibility and participation.

While some programs are administered through the Transfer Payment Ontario (TPON) system, which aims to provide a central access point for funding opportunities but even government officials acknowledge the decentralized approach limits access and leaves intended investments unspent.

The Experience Ontario grant is a case in point. Despite efforts to promote the program, it faced low participation, requiring an application deadline extension.

This example highlights broader inefficiencies within Ontario's funding system, where organizations often encounter fragmented information, burdensome application processes, and delays in fund disbursement. These issues are particularly detrimental to smaller organizations with limited administrative capacity, reducing their ability to secure and effectively implement

funding. Without reforms, Ontario risks underutilizing its grant programs and missing opportunities to support key sectors and communities.

Recommendations

The Ontario Chamber of Commerce urges the Government of Ontario to:

1. Expand communication and outreach efforts to improve awareness of funding opportunities. This includes:
 - a. Regularly updating the portal with new grant announcements and provide automated alerts to registered users.
 - b. Collaborating with local business and community organizations to promote available funding programs.
2. Enhance the Transfer Payment Ontario system to improve usability and provide a more centralized portal for funding opportunities. This includes:
 - a. Ensuring that users can search for grants by type, sector, and eligibility criteria.
 - b. Integrating application tracking and deadline notifications within the portal.
3. Simplify and standardize application and reporting requirements across ministries. This includes:
 - a. Implementing common templates and requirements to reduce redundancy for organizations applying to multiple programs.
4. Provide timely disbursement of approved funds to ensure projects can proceed without unnecessary delays. This includes:
 - a. Establishing benchmarks for processing and distributing funds within defined timelines.

Effective Date: April 26, 2025

Sunset Date: April 26, 2028

K. Addressing the Real Time Provincial Data Gap Surrounding the Cost of Homelessness

Submitted by: The Greater Barrie Chamber of Commerce. Co-sponsored by: The Chamber of Commerce Brantford-Brant, The Orillia District Chamber of Commerce, St. Thomas Chamber of Commerce, Peterborough and the Kawarthas Chamber of Commerce, Whitby Chamber of Commerce, Port Hope and District Chamber of Commerce, Brockville and District Chamber of Commerce, Belleville Chamber of Commerce, Chatham-Kent Chamber of Commerce, Burlington Chamber of Commerce

Issue

Municipalities across Ontario are struggling to manage the burdens that chronic homelessness and a lack of affordable housing have created. The collection methodology and use of data related to homelessness across the province is inconsistent which makes it very challenging to clearly illustrate at any given moment the fiscal impact of our housing crisis. The Government of Ontario needs consistent and relevant provincial data to be able to make better policy decisions

Background

On January 9, 2025, the Association of Municipalities of Ontario released a study that highlighted the unprecedented increase in homeless individuals in Ontario.²⁷⁴ The study by HelpSeeker Technologies showed a 25% increase in people who have experienced homelessness since 2022 and indicated that without significant intervention, homelessness could more than triple by 2035 to almost 300,000 people without stable housing.²⁷⁵

Municipalities in Ontario have an increasing role in addressing homelessness. Ontario is the only province in Canada where social housing has been downloaded to municipalities.²⁷⁶ Between 2016 and 2024, total funding for homelessness overall across all three layers of government has increased from \$1.4 billion to \$2.5 billion. Over this period, funding by the federal government and municipal governments has increased by around 100%. Funding by the provincial government has decreased by 15%.²⁷⁷ This change in funding has increased municipal governments' responsibility in ending homelessness. In addition to acting as the Service System Manager responsible for the distribution of substantial amounts of federal and provincial funding, municipalities in Ontario also now provide 65.1% of total funding, up from 54.5% in 2016.²⁷⁸

Homelessness affects the vitality of downtown cores and shopping districts, where visible homelessness can discourage consumer activity and investment. Improved data can lead to targeted solutions, such as supportive housing in areas with high rates of homelessness, reducing strain on local businesses.

Through the efforts of the Social Action Working Group and the Belleville Chamber of Commerce, Loyalist College's Centre for Healthy Communities will provide in-kind support to undertake an environmental scan and prepare a report outlining what communities across Ontario

are doing to mitigate the challenges related to community safety. The final report will include a repository of initiatives (comparison of services), their approach and structure and their impact on the communities (including fiscal as possible) of community initiatives across the province. The goal is to identify similar services, collaborations and unique approaches to provide broader guidance to funding eligibility.

Data Quality

Studies and audits have indicated that data on homelessness is limited, including data around chronic homelessness. In a 2021 report, the Office of the Auditor General of Ontario highlighted insufficient province-wide data to assess progress.²⁷⁹ Data challenges were also noted by HelpSeeker Technologies as a limitation in their 2024 study, which highlighted issues with regional variations and data quality issues.²⁸⁰ In other sectors, one single piece of information has been developed to help tackle this issue. In the Child Protection sector, for example, the Child Protection Information Network (CPIN) was established due to multiple information systems “compromising information quality, direct service and the efficiency with which information was captured and used.”²⁸¹ This has led to more standardization in data collection and reporting at a provincial level, rather than at the regional level.²⁸² In order to ensure that federal, provincial and municipal funding is effective at reducing homelessness and its impacts on local business and communities, improving data quality is essential. There are currently two main areas impacting poor data quality: data systems and data collection and reporting.

Data Systems

Currently, data on homelessness is collected at the municipal level. Homelessness system managers have a large degree of flexibility to determine the data system that is used to collect homelessness data. While many communities use the same homelessness management information system (HMIS) to collect data (the Homelessness Individuals and Families Information System – HIFIS), this is not a requirement by the provincial government.

Many other provincially funded social services, including Ontario Works and Children services, utilize information systems that are province wide. This prevents duplicate records for individuals that move between regions, as well as ensuring that people are not lost the transition between Service System Managers. All Service System Managers moving to a shared information system would ensure that reporting provides a more accurate number of people experiencing homelessness in Ontario.

Data Collection and Reporting

As decisions around the tools used to collect, store and report data have historically been made at the regional level, variations have developed around which data points are collected and how they are defined. For example, when reporting the number of homelessness individuals in their community, it is inconsistent whether communities include individuals who are accessing shelter services but refuse to provide consent for their data to be collected. In addition, the province and

the federal government have developed different definitions for key terms, including “chronicity”. Both the provincial and federal government consider any person who has been homeless for more than six of the past 12 months as chronic; however, the federal government also includes anyone who has been homeless for 18 of the past 36 months. This means that the number of chronically homeless individuals is higher when using the federal definition, creating challenges for the Service Managers reporting these figures and the organizations comparing communities across Canada.

Recommendations

The Ontario Chamber of Commerce urges the Government of Ontario to:

1. Mandate the use of one information system, such as HIFIS, for all communities in receipt of Homelessness Prevention Program funding to ensure more consistent data collection across the province.
2. Advocate to and work with the federal government on creating one single provincial mechanism to track homelessness measures, such as one HIFIS database shared by all Service Managers in Ontario.
3. Adopt the federal definition of chronicity to make reporting by Service Managers easier and more consistent with communities outside Ontario.
4. Work more closely with municipalities and the federal government to set standardized Key Performance Indicators and standardized naming conventions with clear data definitions that apply across the sector.
5. Collaborate with municipalities to create a metric, tracking the business impacts of homelessness, such as revenue loss or increased operating costs. This metric can then be integrated into broader provincial homelessness data.
6. Create tax incentives or recognition programs for businesses that fund data-related initiatives, such as supporting the rollout of HIFIS or sponsoring research.

Effective Date: April 26, 2025

Sunset Date: April 26, 2028

²⁷⁴ AMO Launches Groundbreaking Homelessness Study: Ontario at a Tipping Point with 80,000 Homeless | AMO (2025)

²⁷⁵ Donaldson, J., Wang, D., Escamilla, C., & Turner, A. (2025). Municipalities under pressure: The human and financial cost of Ontario’s homelessness crisis. HelpSeeker 276 AMO Launches Groundbreaking Homelessness Study: Ontario at a Tipping Point with 80,000 Homeless | AMO (2025)

²⁷⁷ Donaldson, J., Wang, D., Escamilla, C., & Turner, A. (2025). Municipalities under pressure: The human and financial cost of Ontario’s homelessness crisis. HelpSeeker

²⁷⁸ Donaldson, J., Wang, D., Escamilla, C., & Turner, A. (2025). Municipalities under pressure: The human and financial cost of Ontario's homelessness crisis. HelpSeeker

²⁷⁹ Office of the Auditor General of Ontario (2021) 280 Donaldson, J., Wang, D., Escamilla, C., & Turner, A. (2025). Municipalities under pressure: The human and financial cost of Ontario's homelessness crisis. HelpSeeker

²⁸¹ Commission to Promote Sustainable Child Welfare (2012) 282 Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies (2018)

S. Addressing the Underfunding of Ontario's Community Colleges

Submitted by: Belleville Chamber of Commerce. Co-sponsored by: Quinte West Chamber of Commerce, Orillia & District Chamber of Commerce, St. Thomas Chamber of Commerce, Port Hope and District Chamber of Commerce, Greater Barrie Chamber of Commerce, Brockville and District Chamber of Commerce, Chatham-Kent Chamber of Commerce, Peterborough and the Kawarthas Chamber of Commerce, and Whitby Chamber of Commerce

Issue

Ontario's public colleges are facing severe financial strain due to frozen operating grants, the provincially imposed tuition freeze in 2015 and rising costs. These financial pressures have led to campus and program closures, staff reductions, and diminished access to postsecondary education, particularly in rural communities.

Background

Ontario's community colleges were established in 1969 to provide accessible, high-quality, applied, career focused education and training, particularly in smaller, rural, and underserved communities.

These institutions offer a diverse range of programs, including:

- **Certificate and Diploma Programs** in sectors such as
 - healthcare (nursing, paramedic services),
 - education (ECE, social service and developmental service)
 - technology (software development, engineering),
 - business administration, and
 - creative industries.
- **Apprenticeship Programs** that combine in-class training with on-the-job experience to prepare students for certification in skilled trades.
- **Contract and Short-Burst Training Programs** designed to upskill the existing workforce and enhance employability.

Ontario's public colleges play a vital role in developing a skilled workforce that meets the evolving needs of businesses and industries across the province. This is particularly critical in rural and northern communities, where colleges provide accessible education, workforce training, and economic development tailored to local industry and community needs. However, the cost of program delivery in these regions is significantly higher due to per capita enrolment limitations accompanied by geographic, infrastructure, and student support challenges which existing funding formulas fail to adequately address.

From the deficiencies of the current funding model, international student recruitment served a dual purpose; it increased population growth to address anticipated labour force needs and filled the funding gap created by the insufficient funding model. As the funding gap continued to

grow, the government was complacent while colleges became over reliant on international tuition rates to support the shortfall presented by the funding deficit. This will have a much greater impact on the need for a skilled workforce in the long term.

The Ontario government has been able to avoid their responsibility to the community college system while their shortfall was masked by revenues generated through international student tuition. Of the \$1.4B in funding¹²¹ announced to support skilled training, none has been directed to the community college system and the imposition of the federal cap on international students along with the current messaging that international students are no longer welcome in Canada has had an immediate and devastating impact on community colleges' revenue streams.

Community colleges are deeply embedded in their regions, supporting local economies through partnerships with municipalities, healthcare providers, businesses, and cultural organizations. They play a crucial role in addressing labor shortages and providing education pathways for underrepresented and marginalized populations.

However, rural community colleges face severe funding challenges, including:

- **Flat or Frozen Operating Grants:** Provincial funding has remained stagnant in real dollars for over a decade, while domestic tuition has been frozen at 2015 levels. Ontario spends only \$0.44 for every dollar spent by the rest of Canada on post-secondary education. Ontario is by far the lowest funded system in Canada.
- **Increased Delivery Costs:** Rural and northern colleges face higher operational costs due to greater infrastructure needs, limited transit options, higher student support requirements, and competitive constraints in attracting faculty and resources.
- **Exclusion from Capital Investments:** Ontario has invested \$1.4 billion into the Skills Development Fund (SDF) as of January 2025. However, funding has disproportionately benefited private and union-affiliated training centers, excluding community colleges from essential infrastructure and capacity-building investments.

Recent capital investments have disproportionately favoured private and union-affiliated training centers, leaving community colleges without the necessary funding to expand capacity, upgrade infrastructure, or develop new programs. Private and union-affiliated training centres, while valuable for trade-specific training, do not offer the same breadth of education or regional accessibility as community colleges and are not generally located in more rural communities; forcing students seeking these certifications to find temporary accommodations outside their communities which also impacts completion rates.

As a result, rural students are increasingly forced to leave their communities to access education and individuals tend to stay where they study creating a brain drain or out-migration of young talent.

A well-funded college system is essential to fostering inclusive economic growth, addressing workforce shortages, and ensuring businesses across Ontario have access to a highly trained

talent pool. Despite their pivotal role, Ontario's community colleges have been largely excluded from significant government investments, such as the Skills Development Fund (SDF).

The current funding model creates inequities in resource allocation, despite community colleges providing a more comprehensive approach to workforce development. Addressing these disparities is essential to sustaining Ontario's skilled labour pipeline and ensuring equitable access to education for all communities.

Recommendations

The Ontario Chamber of Commerce urges the Government of Ontario to:

1. Expand capital funding eligibility through programs like the Skills Development Fund to prioritize investments for Ontario's community colleges, ensuring they can access resources to upgrade facilities and expand both apprenticeship and diploma programs.
2. Increase core operating funding for Ontario's community colleges to reflect the costs of delivering a diverse array of programs. This includes:
 - a) Adjust funding annually to account for inflation, regional delivery costs, and the growing demand for both trades and diploma training.
 - b) Introduce performance-based funding incentives for programs that successfully address labour market gaps.
 - c) Provide direct funding and incentives for initiatives such as co-op placements, apprenticeships, micro-credentials, and industry partnerships.
3. Develop a funding formula that accounts for the higher costs associated with delivering education in rural and northern regions.
4. Ensure transparency and accountability in the allocation of workforce development funds. This includes:
 - a. Regularly publishing detailed reports on funding distribution, including the amounts allocated to Ontario's community colleges, private training providers, and union centres.
 - b. Establishing an independent oversight body to review and assess workforce development investments.

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