

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Emergency Department at risk of closure

Kenora, ON, September 4, 2024 – The physician staffing crisis at Lake of the Woods District Hospital (LWDH) began in the summer of 2022 and has steadily grown since. In early 2022, LWDH had approximately 20 physicians who worked in the Emergency Department (ED). That number has decreased to an alarming nine part-time physicians still working today.

The reasons for the decline are vast, but mainly point to physicians choosing to work in communities with competitive compensation models, areas of practice with administrative support and a manageable work week. Dr. Meghan Olson, President of Medical Staff on the LWDH board of directors elaborates “I think it's important for the community to recognize what immense pressure the physicians are under. The same group of doctors that are working in the ER are also doing inpatient medicine, delivering babies, anesthesia, working in the OR, and maintaining their family practices. We have approximately one third of the number of physicians we need but are providing the same level of service as if we were fully staffed. Without significant change to our healthcare system, I cannot see how it is physically possible for such a small group of doctors to maintain our current services.

In Ontario, hospitals with physician shortages must alert the Ministry of Health four days before any unfilled emergency department shifts. If a physician shift remains unstaffed, the ED must close and LWDH's ED has been at risk of closure multiple times over the last year and twice this summer alone. Dr. Sean Moore, Chief of Staff explains “Leading up to the final moments before closing, we have managed to cobble together shift coverage with both local and visiting physicians. These doctors are taking on excessive hours at the expense of sleep, personal and family time. Our physicians cannot sustain these conditions.”

The physician shortage in Kenora and the surrounding region is not limited to emergency medicine, there is also an extreme shortage of physicians working in primary care. When this happens, the result is patients left without a primary care practitioner visiting the ER for non-urgent care. Cheryl O'Flaherty, LWDH President & CEO explains how this impacts the Emergency Department “In 2021/2022 we saw roughly 15,000 ED visits. Last fiscal year (2023/2024) that number had increased to over 20,000 visits. We know this is directly related to the lack of access to primary care practitioners in our communities. The new Nurse Practitioner Service, an extension of the Emergency Department is a way the hospital is trying to manage wait times and support the dire need, but it is in no way enough to manage the care needs of our communities.”

Another way LWDH has kept emergency care available is relying on locum physicians. In recent months, an astounding 75% of ED physician shifts are covered by these visiting

physicians. “This is a stop-gap measure that is in no way sustainable in the long run and offers no continuity of care.” – Dr. Laurel Snyder, LWDH’s Emergency Services Lead.

An ED closure in Kenora would be far reaching and not limited to Kenora, as it would heavily impact paramedic, land and air ambulance services, as well as put an unprecedented strain on other regional hospitals. Should the ED in Kenora close, the closest emergency departments would be an hour and a half east (Dryden Regional Health Centre) or two hours west, across the Manitoba border to Winnipeg.

The Solution

A local physician and clinical network (the All Nations Health Partners Ontario Health Team Clinical Advisory Committee) has a transformation plan for our healthcare system and is urging the Ministry of Health to support their proposed innovative, and cost-effective solution. The proposal is a new rural generalist care model designed to provide continuous health care services and establish a competitive compensation plan for all rural generalist physicians.

The ANHP has been in close communication with Minister Greg Rickford, Member of Provincial Parliament for the Kenora-Rainy River riding on the critical state our communities are in, he is supporting the process to improve the situation, but the change action remains in the Ministry’s hands. Yesterday’s media release from the ANHP OHT calls for immediate attention and action from the Ministry of Health to protect the lives and well-being of the people of Kenora and surrounding first nations communities.

Also see – [Kenora’s Healthcare System on brink of collapse](#) from The All Nations Health Partners Ontario Health Team Clinical Advisory Committee, September 3, 2024.

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