

Improving and Maintaining the Health of the People

The Contribution of Public Health to Reducing Hallway Medicine

As the Government of Ontario considers one of its most high-profile election commitments – the elimination of “Hallway Medicine” in Ontario – this paper has been developed to explain the work of the public health sector and to highlight the important role that the sector can play in meeting that challenge.

One of the answers to keeping people out of hospital hallways is to reduce the demand for hospital and primary care services. Building healthy communities through an efficient, proactive and locally managed public health system, mandated to lead on preventative measures to protect and promote the health of Ontarians, can go a long way to reducing that demand.

Ontario’s public health system delivers value for money, ensuring Ontarians remain healthy, and are able to contribute fully to a prosperous Ontario. Studies have shown tremendous return on investment. For example, every \$1 spent on:

- **mental health and addictions** saves \$7 in health costs and \$30 dollars in lost productivity and social costs;
- **immunizing children** with the measles-mumps-rubella vaccine saves \$16 in health care costs; and
- **early childhood development and health care** saves up to \$9 in future spending on health, social and justice services.

A systematic review of international public health investments published in 2017 concludes that cuts to public health budgets in high income countries represent a false economy and are likely to generate billions of dollars of additional costs to health services and the wider economy.

At the same time, the public health system supports an effective health care system by reducing the demand for hospital services through:

- advising and convening diverse stakeholders (e.g. schools, police, healthcare) to improve mental health and addictions treatments in community settings;
- ensuring people are treated for sexually transmitted infections and tuberculosis and preventing infections and related hospital visits;
- safeguarding the community from harms caused by impure drinking water and environmental hazards;
- reducing the impact of outbreaks, such as influenza in Long Term Care Homes and hospitals; and
- providing a point of access to supports and information for people with greater needs, whether rural, newcomers or others isolated in urban environments.

In short, public health actions now can result in fewer emergency room and doctor’s office visits today and in the future.

The geographic breadth of Ontario means that the needs of residents differ from region to region. Public health and community-based programs and services require localised input and delivery, leveraging existing partnerships with schools, municipalities, business networks, health care providers and social services organizations, resulting in the ability to quickly and efficiently respond to the needs

of the people:

- In 2016, the Middlesex-London Health Unit identified an outbreak of HIV in London. Provincially, HIV rates largely driven by men who have sex with men, had been declining for a decade. In London, rates were spiking, and driven by IV drug use. The Health Unit put boots on the ground, assembled an outreach team to find people on the street, and connected them with HIV testing and treatment. Today, the outbreak is over.
- As the opioid crisis became critical in 2017, Ottawa Public Health supported people most at risk, informed schools and parents, made naloxone available across the city, and created a new real-time surveillance system. Today, the public health unit is using the surveillance data to inform and organize a Mental Health and Substance Use Summit, with The Royal Hospital. A broad range of stakeholders is identifying actions to increase prevention and create a more integrated approach to improve mental health assessment and access to treatment.
- Recently, the North Bay Parry Sound Health Unit identified a need for enhanced dental services for low-income adults, based on data about high rates of emergency room visits for dental problems. The health unit solved the problem by starting a now well-used dental clinic for people who meet the financial and program criteria.
- Last year, Toronto Public Health completed implementation of a wireless strategy that allows personal services setting inspectors and nurses inspecting vaccine fridges in doctors' offices to complete their visits using tablets that upload results in real time rather than recording the inspection on paper and entering it on the website later. This means that results of inspections, information on the BodySafe website that people use each day to shop for a nail salon or other personal service, is the most current information.
- Local public health units are increasingly using technology to serve people, improving convenience and cost-effectiveness, such as through interactive web-based prenatal education and chats with nurses on Facebook and by using on-line video to observe people taking tuberculosis medication instead of in-person observation. Such innovations begin locally and have spread across the province.

These local solutions show that, when combined with stable, designated funding, the public health system has the capacity to relieve pressure on doctors and hospitals. Furthermore, accountability is firmly established by provincial legislation and policy ensuring that the money spent on public health is spent effectively and with purpose.

Together we serve the people of Ontario to ensure:

- that healthy people can support a strong economy, providing a direct economic impact;
- coordination of responses to community health concerns such as mental health and addictions, in partnership with community level organizations;
- reduction of pressures on doctors and hospitals by concentrating on the health of the community, starting at birth; and,
- a significant, cost-effective contribution to the elimination of hallway medicine.

In conclusion, public health works as a system that is greater than the sum of its parts - leveraging the skills and experience of nutritionists, nurses, health promoters, inspectors, epidemiologists, doctors, dentists and dental hygienists, board members and administrators, and more – to together support and protect the health of the people of Ontario. Public health delivers promotion, protection and prevention services on behalf of, and in partnership with, the Ontario Government.