December 8, 2016

The Honourable Dr. Eric Hoskins  
Minister of Health and Long-Term Care  
Hepburn Block, 10th Floor  
80 Grosvenor Street  
Toronto, ON M7A 2C4  
ehoskins.mpp.co@liberal.ola.org

Dear Minister Hoskins:

Re: Access to Publicly Funded Oral Health Programs for Low-Income Adults and Seniors

During its meeting on November 2, 2016, Lambton County Council (which serves as the County of Lambton Board of Health) accepted a report from Lambton Public Health regarding Access to Publicly Funded Oral Health Programs for Low-Income Adults and Seniors.

In January 2016, the Healthy Smiles Ontario public oral health program for children was expanded to help all low-income children, regardless of any coverage under employer-sponsored dental insurance. However, the expansion did not address the barriers to accessing dental care experienced by working poor adults and seniors. These cohorts are often ineligible for Ontario Works or the Ontario Disability Support Program and are without employer-sponsored dental benefits. These marginalized adults and seniors find they cannot afford to access dental care at the best of times. Often they must choose between paying for living expenses such as rent, utilities, or groceries, and paying for their oral health.

Lambton County Council recognizes the effects of poor oral health on general health as well as the impacts that extend beyond medical concerns. Unchecked, oral disease may lead to pain and infection which can spread throughout the body. Poor oral health can affect employability, work attendance and performance, self-esteem, and social relationships.

Oral health issues are not covered under universal healthcare through the Ontario Health Insurance Program. For low-income adults or seniors who are less likely to have employer-sponsored dental benefits and are more likely to report poor oral health, the cost of dental care is prohibitive. Typically when an adult or senior cannot afford to visit a dentist for pain and infection in their mouth they often end up visiting the emergency
room, or their family doctor instead. At these visits they will receive a course of antibiotics and pain medications which do not address the true cause of the problem. This only provides a temporary solution often resulting in repeat emergency room visits to defer the pain. In 2016, the Association of Ontario Health Centres reported over 60,000 visits to emergency rooms resulting in an estimated $31 million for costs directly related to oral health issues. In 2014, the Erie St. Clair Local Health Integration Network region had 3,160 emergency room visits due to oral health issues.

The Provincial Government has promised to extend oral health programs starting in 2025. However, nine years is too long to wait to address the current demand in low-income adults and seniors. In response to this delayed action, Lambton County Council calls on the Province to accelerate its promise to expand oral health programming for low-income adults and seniors starting within the next two years.

Sincerely,

Warden Bill Weber  
County of Lambton (Board of Health)

cc: Bob Bailey, MPP, Sarnia-Lambton  
Monte McNaughton, MPP, Lambton-Kent-Middlesex  
Linda Stewart, Executive Director, Association of Local Public Health Agencies  
Ontario Boards of Health  
Dr. Sudit Ranade, Medical Officer of Health  
Andrew Taylor, General Manager, Public Health Services Division