

Guelph-Wellington Ontario Health Team Physician Recruitment Strategy Collaboration

To: Chair and Members of the Board of Health

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Recommendations

It is recommended that the Board of Health receive this report for information.

Key Points

- In 2025, Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph (WDG) Public Health supported the Guelph Wellington Ontario Health Team (GW OHT) Physician Recruitment Task Force to develop a coordinated Physician Recruitment Strategy to strengthen access to care across the region.
- Increasing healthcare demands, physician retirements and population growth are driving the need to recruit more family physicians and specialists to the region.
- The strategy provides an evidence-informed framework for family physician recruitment, focusing on building local capacity, supporting physicians and promoting Guelph-Wellington as a destination to practice.
- WDG Public Health facilitated a diverse group of regional partners to develop a strategy that reflects a shared commitment to sustainable access to care and community resilience.

Background

Primary care is a cornerstone of a strong health system and a critical determinant of population health. Ensuring timely and equitable primary care services is essential to achieving public health goals, particularly in underserved and rural communities.¹ Effective primary care provides comprehensive, coordinated services through family physicians, nurse practitioners and allied health professionals. A sufficient physician workforce supports prevention, early intervention and continuity of care, thereby reducing health inequities and improving population health outcomes.^{2,3} Family physicians also contribute directly to public health through disease surveillance, outbreak response and the promotion of healthier lifestyles.³

Specialist physicians, both community- and hospital-based, collaborate with primary care providers to support comprehensive and continuous care.⁴ However, Ontario continues to experience a physician shortage, prompting the province to invest \$1.8 billion over the next three years to strengthen primary care teams and improve attachment rates.⁵

The Guelph-Wellington region has been affected by physician shortages driven by population growth, increasing healthcare demands and physician retirements.⁶ Between 2016 and 2021, the City of Guelph's and the County of Wellington's populations grew by 9.5 percent and 8.4 percent respectively.⁷ These demographic trends have contributed to increased demand for care, resulting in growing competition for limited physician resources.⁶ Approximately nine percent of residents remain unattached to a primary care provider,⁸ and shortages are expected to increase as the population ages and requires more complex care. Projections estimate that between 2024 and 2051, an additional 136 family physicians will be required to meet community needs.^{6,9}

In response, the GW OHT has identified family physician and specialist recruitment as a regional priority.⁶ The GW OHT brings together local health and social care partners to create a more integrated, person-centered system of care.¹⁰ In 2023, WDG Public Health began working with the GW OHT to better understand the landscape of physician recruitment locally. Between 2024 and 2025 WDG Public Health was tasked with facilitating the GW OHT and other local partners to articulate a comprehensive physician recruitment strategy aimed at enhancing and augmenting current local efforts. This collaborative effort focused initially on family physician recruitment, laying the foundation for a coordinated, region-wide approach to improving access to care and addressing physician workforce challenges.

Discussion

Physician Recruitment Strategy Development

The development of the physician recruitment strategy was an evidence-based, coordinated and collaborative initiative. The process began with a rapid review, which identified three foundational pillars essential to effective physician recruitment:

- **Investing in Structural Resources** – Establishing dedicated recruitment staff, sustainable funding mechanisms and a clear governance structure.
- **Comprehensive Physician Support** – Incorporating strategies to promote work-life balance, offer financial incentives and provide mentorship and professional development opportunities.
- **Community Engagement and Exposure** – Enhancing local training opportunities, engaging potential physicians early in their careers and promoting the region through community partnerships and targeted marketing initiatives.

These pillars served as the guiding framework for the development of a comprehensive physician recruitment strategy, and ensured a multi-pronged, collaborative and long-term approach tailored to Guelph-Wellington's needs.

Following the rapid review, an environmental scan and current state analysis were conducted to assess existing strengths, gaps, opportunities and barriers within Guelph-Wellington's physician recruitment landscape. Consultations were held with local recruiting professionals, hospitals and other major physician and healthcare organizations through key informant interviews. Insights gathered from these partners directly informed the strategy's design and priorities.

An analysis of current and future physician needs in Guelph-Wellington was completed using multiple data sources. This work identified existing shortages and projected how many physicians would be needed to meet population growth and community health needs over the next 25 years. The analysis also considered important factors such as the number of physicians nearing retirement, the growing senior population and residents who are not currently attached to a family physician. These findings provided valuable insight into what would be required to achieve Ontario Health's overall goal of 100 percent patient attachment.

Strategic Planning and Performance Measurement

In addition to the findings from the rapid review, environmental scan and future needs assessment, consultations were held with key partners to ensure alignment of the strategy with regional goals. Partners included regional and provincial representatives as well as health service organizations. During the consultation process, short-, medium- and long-term priorities were established that were identified as both impactful and feasible, ensuring efforts reflected local health system priorities and community needs. As a result, the strategy outlined actionable tasks, timelines and suggested governance mechanisms to effectively guide implementation.

To ensure continuous improvement and evaluation of the strategy, a performance measurement framework was developed. Key performance indicators (KPIs) were developed with support from partners to monitor recruitment efforts. Suggested KPIs included monitoring recruitment and retention of family physicians, tracking medical learner engagement and assessing community patient attachment rates. Integration of these KPIs with existing recruitment efforts would allow partners to assess progress and adjust activities to maintain alignment with regional needs. Following this process, the final Physician Recruitment Strategy was endorsed by the GW OHT Physician Recruitment Task Force. A full version of the strategy document is provided in Appendix A.

Health Equity Implications

Physician shortages can affect communities differently, with certain populations experiencing greater barriers to accessing care. For instance, newcomers and refugees may face delays in obtaining Ontario Health Insurance Plan (OHIP) coverage or require additional support to navigate the healthcare system. In rural Wellington, some Mennonite community members receive care from family physicians but are not formally rostered, as they do not participate in OHIP. These uncounted or non-rostered groups highlight the importance of community input and using multiple data sources to fully capture local healthcare needs. The physician recruitment strategy addressed these inequities by embedding health equity principles across the planning and implementation process. This included conducting a comprehensive review of best practices, assessing the unique needs of rural communities, and collaborating with partners to ensure that the experiences of all populations informed recruitment priorities and actions.

Conclusion

Through a collaborative, evidence-informed approach, WDG Public Health, the GW OHT and regional partners have developed a strategy to strengthen local recruitment efforts and improve access to care across the region. Grounded in best practices, the strategy outlined clear goals, timelines and a governance and evaluation framework to complement, but not duplicate, existing family physician recruitment initiatives.

Next steps include finalizing recruitment governance, hiring a Guelph-based recruiter to support implementation and expanding the strategy's scope to include additional healthcare specialists. A delegation of members from Guelph General Hospital and the Guelph Family Health Team attended a Special Council Meeting regarding the 2026 Budget for the Guelph City Council on November 18, 2025. It was shared that physician recruitment funding was approved for the 2026 Budget, however details are pending with a planned release in March 2026.

This initiative is aligned with public health priorities such as equitable access to care and sustainable health systems and reflected a shared commitment to enhancing system-wide collaboration and supporting long-term improvements in community health and resilience.

Ontario Public Health Standards

Foundational Standards

- ☒ Population Health Assessment
- ☒ Health Equity
- ☒ Effective Public Health Practice
- ☐ Emergency Management

Program Standards

- ☒ Chronic Disease Prevention and Well-Being
- ☐ Food Safety
- ☐ Healthy Environments
- ☒ Healthy Growth and Development
- ☐ Immunization
- ☒ Infectious and Communicable Diseases Prevention and Control
- ☐ Safe Water
- ☐ School Health
- ☒ Substance Use and Injury Prevention

2024-2028 WDGPH Strategic Goals

More details about these strategic goals can be found in [WDGPH's 2024-2028 Strategic Plan](#).

- ☒ Improve health outcomes
- ☐ Focus on children's health
- ☒ Build strong partnerships
- ☒ Innovate our programs and services
- ☒ Lead the way toward a sustainable Public Health system

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